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Edge(work)

and

Beginnings: Towards a Trans- and Gender  
Non-Conforming Poetics

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PhD in Creative Writing  
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# Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where states otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

Dated: 12/9/2019

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized, cursive letters that appear to be 'J B' followed by a horizontal flourish.



# Acknowledgments

First, to my supervisor, Dr. Miriam Gamble, thank you for always seeing the poem – or the potential for the poem, when not everyone could. Without you this project would not have been possible in so many ways. You have continually been in my corner, always able to see promise (especially when I could not) and drew out the better writer in me. And thank you to Dr. Jane McKie for your support over the years in both critical and poetic endeavors.

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To Elizabeth, you are in every poem – even if you cannot see it. Thank you for saying yes.

# Abstracts

The poems in *Edge(work)* traverse and ponder the strangeness of memory; an often pluralized speaker invites the reader into an opaque world of grief, loss, slow-burning desires and maternal connection. I am a trans- writer and, like the poetry I analyze in my critical essay, my creative work engages – sometimes playfully, sometimes painfully – with the challenges of gender categorization, probing and seeking to overcome apparent boundaries of identity and selfhood. At times acutely political, at times lyrically elegiac, these poems conjure, address and interrogate loss and estrangement in dream-like terrains, articulating personal and geographical journeys through gathered moments of intensity. My work is often short form; as a manuscript, the poems weave – from brief, immersively felt and thought encounters with self, other and world – a tapestry which depicts the struggle to understand being trans-, multiple, in love, and a traveller between homes.

The critical thesis, “Beginnings: Towards a Trans- and Gender Non-Conforming Poetics,” explores shared motifs and individual approaches in the work of Qwo-Li Driskill, TC Tolbert and Eli Clare. While the thesis presumes the centrality of gender to the manner, viewpoint and imaginative insights of this writing, and traces connections between the three poets’ oeuvres, I have written on individual bodies of work; I have not wanted to propose that trans- and gender non-conforming poetry is some kind of uniform quantity which contains x ingredients or takes y approach. Nonetheless, through close readings of the collections of my chosen poets, I have sought to elucidate some key features of this emerging field.

The three poets whose collections I explore are very different, both as people and as writers: Driskill, Cherokee Two-Spirit, writes from the interstices of race as well as gender; Tolbert, genderqueer, is a highly experimental poet who pressurizes form to unearth destabilizing questions about self and authenticity; Clare, genderqueer, is a gender and disability activist

whose writing engages sharply with the treatment and representation of the non-normative body. Each chapter in the essay therefore has a different focus, in terms of theme as well as author: in discussing Driskill's poems I have explored the textual performance of hybridity; when considering TC Tolbert's work I have foregrounded form; I have centered the discussion of Eli Clare's *The Marrow's Telling* on metaphor and representation (specifically, representations of the body). Throughout the thesis, I contend that these writers open doors to new, and newly expansive, realities, creating languages and structures which effectually express and articulate trans- / queer / genderqueer experience.



# Lay Summaries

*Edge(work)*, a manuscript of poems, probes themes of loss, estrangement, the body, love, desire, and the notion of home, and is delivered from the perspective of a North American trans-speaker living in the UK. Tonally, the work is sometimes sharply political, sometimes lyrically elegiac. Individual poems often center on and sensorily evoke moments of intensity; read together as a manuscript, they offer an intimate portrayal of parallel personal journeys through space, time and the complexities of selfhood.

“Beginnings: Towards a Trans- and Gender Non-Conforming Poetics” performs close readings on the work of three poets: Qwo-Li Driskill, TC Tolbert and Eli Clare. This extended essay outlines and analyzes some motifs and strategies discernible in all three bodies of work, but also emphasizes the individuality of each corpus addressed. Hybridity is a central concern of my chapter on Qwo-Li Driskill (Cherokee Two-Spirit); when discussing TC Tolbert (genderqueer) I address the dynamic tensions of form and with Eli Clare (genderqueer) I focus on representations of the non-normative body. Collectively, I argue that these writers offer new ways of seeing and thinking about the world, ways inflected by, if not solely relatable to, their trans- / queer / genderqueer identities.

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Edge(work)

## POETRY CONTENTS

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## Free Nipple Graft Technique

Unlike flowers, cut nerves  
never blossom. They misfire  
in the vessel of my body  
and smoke my pectorals.  
I feel their sizzle in a deep breath  
or the burning imprint of a palm.

It was the flick of the scalpel's smile  
that flayed them, ribboned  
the gentle threads – excised the whole  
nipple, the color of pursed lips.  
A poppy planted back  
on my chest, smaller, deflated. Never again  
a visual presence in the cold.  
Flat as a stamp licked and pressed  
to the body with determination.  
Nothing like the surgeon's cartoon.

## Dear Christopher,

I was wrong to not buy you four hamburgers  
when you were fourteen. I did not understand  
the depth of your hunger. I do not think  
I can blame it on the searing heat, or the steep descent  
from the mountains, or the bleary traffic.  
I thought having *that* many hamburgers was an extravagance  
like bills in your wallet only the bank can break, shampoo  
purchased on a trip and left unfinished, even  
the audacity of fronted money.  
I now know the torrent of testosterone hunger.  
Water in a desert to it is four hamburgers,  
three fries, a shake and bottomless coke, and still more.  
It is animal, meaty, void-like – but forever. It is that melancholy tone  
you put me through for two hours, the songs  
you raged at me from the back seat of the minivan.

## Packing List

You take only your old clothes  
so no one but you  
will want them,  
your worst shoes –  
nothing that is treasured.  
Like the good camera  
you left on a train,  
or your father's chunky sweater.  
*Pick carefully,*  
you tell me,  
*try to think of them*  
*as gifts to strange cities*  
*for safe passage.*

## Mrak Hall Fee Hike Protests

Spring 2010

They want to get fucked up to forget.  
Police in full dark dress and goggled masks  
zip-tied their wrists tighter than bound newsprint,  
stuffed them in SWAT vans and sat on their paperwork.

Police in full dark dress and goggled masks  
never acknowledged the bouquets tight in their fists,  
stuffed them in SWAT vans and sat on their paperwork.  
I brought bagels and juice in a show of humanity.

If the police acknowledged the bouquets bound in twine  
maybe my friends wouldn't need to bear purple blooms;  
bagels and juice do not really remind them of humanity  
as they exit the jail cells, blinking back fluorescent night.

My friends wouldn't need to bear purple blooms  
if their wrists were not zip-tied  
and they'd never had to exit the jail cells blinking.  
They want to get fucked up to forget.



## Equations to Integrate Along a Gender Curve

brave and outlandish  
in front of the mirror,  
derivative rules exclude  
what a trans\* person should wear  
to a drag party

no one teaches these identity functions

factorial of borrowed items:  
someone's purple push-up bra  
for these shrinking parabolas,  
tighty whities overstuffed,  
a pink trucker hat from Pahrump, NV,  
titty mountains and cherry nips  
approaching a slant of infinite limit

the bicycle pack of queers  
clamber to wheels,  
ties and pasted moustaches  
flagging a vector into the darkness

vibrational constants pump music  
to harmonic progression  
as we empty beer cans,  
leave glitter curves on the walls

here are the limits of behavior,  
unbelievably a hand gropes breasts  
I THOUGHT THEY WERENT REAL!  
words slur and hang,  
polynomials cloud the air

not everyone can proof this equation  
my exhalation  
Lady, just don't grab my tube sock dick.

## It's Not What Everyone Says It Will Be

making a new human

Say it doesn't matter,  
that we've been hand-grinding  
brewing steaming cups of hope –

we might forget it all  
when the answer is clear

like water crashing the ceiling  
or the sure groove of my nail  
or your voice on key  
reassured, measured  
because you can read notes  
reasonably well

we are both educated on  
the possibilities, a list of statistics  
that line our thoughts at night  
like runway lights

## Memorial Across the Atlantic

When I cup my hand  
to measure your grief  
it falls like water  
through my fingers.

I cannot know  
if the words  
I emptied together for you,  
I cannot trust them  
to carry my intent –  
the stumble-shake in my bones.

I want to link arms  
fingers and hands –  
create a bridge  
allow us to stand  
feet sunk like pylons  
holding against the dark weight of it.

## Beginning

after Kien Lam's "Linsanity"

Part of me is always  
her at our birth  
a sunset of jaundice

I don't remember  
mucus newness  
plastered hair  
the ribbons of me  
trailing from the ribbons  
of mother

my toes  
counted  
ten ten times over  
a repeat  
like the first lucky clover  
ever found

Part of me is always  
that beating heart  
those weak lungs

# Beginnings: Towards a Trans- and Gender Non-Conforming Poetics

## A Brief Introduction

*Poetry gives breath to a language that is not only resistant to normative discursive flows but one that also has the capacity to speak to and account for bodies that inhabit non-normative or queer expressions of temporality and spatialization (namely, bodies in motion, transition, and flux).*

Lizzy Kaval, "Introduction: Poetry as Possibility and Necessity"

Trans- and gender non-conforming poetics is a burgeoning field, a discourse which is currently undergoing dynamic evolution. At the beginning of this project, I was inspired by TC Tolbert and Trace Petersen's groundbreaking anthology *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics*, published at the end of 2013 in the United States. Since the success of this volume, many additional anthologies have been published both in the US and beyond (my primary context is the US and the UK) with the similar aim of creating a community of writers – though in addition to presenting their creative work, *Troubling the Line* asked poets to write poetics statements, thereby opening out and contextualizing different and diverse practices. It was through this anthology that I first discovered Tolbert's own creative work.

The field of trans- poetry has only recently been approached in ways that address a poet's identity, and only a small amount of critical work has so far been done towards defining a poetics. Lizzy Kaval's project uses *Troubling the Line* as a foundation for the examination of trans- and gender non-conforming practice and attempts to define the poetic field in broader terms: her work is one of the first instances of poetry criticism, trans and queer studies, and preexisting writing on individual trans- poets being brought together. There have been several other critics<sup>1</sup> who have worked on projects similar to Kaval's, but generally these relate more specifically to a few poets and do not venture into a project of definition. The following chapters themselves only begin to gather a body of critical work on a small number of trans- and gender non-conforming poets, and are not intended as a means of defining the trans- poetic field. This was a decision partly based on space – a study of this length could not hope to be both encompassing and sufficiently detailed – but also, and relatedly, of critical outlook, as explicated below.

As a trans- writer myself, I have found value in reading and analyzing the work of more established writers in my community. Reading these works which investigate aspects of identity and

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<sup>1</sup> Petersen's article, "Becoming a Trans Poet: Samuel Ace, Max Wolf Valerio, and kari edwards" is a good example of this. However, Oliver Moore's article, "The Importance of a Forward-Looking Trans Poetics" tries to contextualize the trans- poetics discourse, while also focusing on a few specific poets.

experience I too have been searching for the means to articulate has helped me feel embraced as well as encouraged to be more ambitious and risk-taking in my own work. Of the three poets I have written about, I was drawn to Eli Clare first, likely because I had an opportunity in 2009 to hear him speak, but also because his poetry longs for a kind of healing through story and transition – and the stories of transition. Poetry “is a necessary means of survival and existence, and a sanctuary where feelings can be explored and spawned into new language, then into ideas, and eventually into tangible action” (Kaval 2). For these poets, to write their personal narratives into existence is a political act. I find this urgency, desire and, crucially, focus on becoming in TC Tolbert and Qwo-Li Driskill’s poetry, too. Each of these poets engages with the importance of story and past differently, but none of them attempt to erase where they have come from or who they were at different points in their transformation, which is arguably, and as their work suggests, an ongoing process.

By setting these three writers alongside one another, I have found that particular motifs do arise in all of their work, but I am keen to clarify that my analysis is not exhaustive nor is it definitive. Just as these poets write possibilities and dreams of what gender, the body, and memory can be, this project is full of possibility and, hopefully, openness. Trans- and gender non-conforming writers are in search of a language to define themselves and the world around them: “Poetry lends form to the inarticulate. It ‘translates existential experience – including experience for which we have no words – into linguistic form, sound and texture,’” (Kaval 1) and has a role “in both naming and disrupting binaries” (Moore 41). Working on this project has also involved searching for critical vocabularies adequate to trans- and gender non-conforming texts. Because, in the same way that the poets whose work I explore are testing language and forms through which to express their experience, I have had to test out ways to accurately codify what I interpret. My essay borrows terms and ideas from many different fields: memory theory, linguistics, feminist theories, trans studies, photography, body theory, disability studies, Native American studies, Native American poetry, as well as poetry criticism. The aim of my work has been not to define or delimit a language, but to bring to the poetry the range of tools necessary to adequately analyze it.

The terms used throughout the chapters are clearly defined in context; however, it is important to understand the basic decision I made in choosing the terms trans- and gender non-conforming. I am using Kaval’s synthesis of terminology and usage because she argues for a broad and forward-moving

definition, instead of using trans, trans\*, or transgender which the LGBT Foundation defines as “an inclusive umbrella term that consists of binary trans people (trans men and trans women), as well as non-binary people and people who cross dress.” There are a myriad of different identities not explicitly named in this general definition and it can create categories that have become institutionalized and stabilized (Kaval 14). Whereas, in addition to the fact that I wish to avoid identifiers that foreclose and fix, what I am interested in is – as the content and focus of my chapters testifies – precisely that which is unstable, fluid, multiple, which opens up avenues of potential rather than definitively classifies. I will be using trans- because:

Rather than just referring to a wide demographic or community of non-gender conforming people, trans- pushes beyond these contextual limitations to include trans- not only as an adjective but also as a verb – a way of doing something ... the decision to use the hyphen ‘matters a great deal, precisely because it marks the difference between the implied nominalism of “trans” and the explicit relationality of “trans-,” which remains open-ended and resists the premature foreclosure by attachment to any single suffix’. (Kaval 13-14)

Additionally, at times in the chapters I use the word queer. When queer is used in relation to the poets, it addresses their sexuality, “primarily nonnormative desires and sexual practices” (Love 172). When queer is used in terms of work, it is employed as a broader term than LGBT+ or as a verb. However, as Heather Love points out, “it is both theoretically and practically difficult to draw a clear line between,” queer and transgender (172). She elaborates as follows:

If *queer* can be understood as refusing the stabilizations of both gender and sexuality implied by the categories gay and lesbian and opening onto a wider spectrum of sexual nonnormativity, *transgender* emerged as a term to capture a range of gendered embodiments, practices, and community formations that cannot be accounted for by the traditional binary. (172-173)

Additionally, both “refer to crossing ... both terms invoke mobility as well as its limits” (Love 175). The limits and boundaries of the categories queer and trans- intertwine. However, while the term queer is sometimes criticized for erasing more specific identities, I am using it in spaces where trans- is too narrow and a more precise term does not exist.

It is also important for me to explain the difference between trans- and Two-Spirit, especially because I do not want these terms to be conflated even though I am situating these two identities alongside one another in this project. I am not an authority on Native/Indigenous cultures; however, Joshua Whitehead’s letter withdrawing from the Lambda Literary Award Nomination for Trans Poetry



has been illuminating and informative to me, a white trans- person who comes from a background of the colonizer. Whitehead writes: “I recognize the difficulty of categorizing Two-Spirit (2SQ) within Western conceptualizations of sex, sexuality, and gender. To be Two-Spirit/Indigiqueer, for me, is a celebration of the fluidity of gender, sex, sexuality, and identities, one that is firmly grounded within nehiyawewein (the Cree language) and nehiyaw world-views.” Driskill, who is part Cherokee, also identifies as Two-Spirit, which s/he defines as follows: “The term ‘Two-Spirit’ was started as an act of resistance to anthropologists using the word *berdache* to describe traditional Native alternative gender roles. It is also employed to describe contemporary Queer Native people and give Native people a word to communicate traditional gender diversity in English” (Driskill, “Call Me Brother” 224). However, Driskill warns that, “there are as many different ways of being Cherokee and Two-Spirit as there are Cherokee Two-Spirits” (“Shaking Our Shells” 130). This is a foundational point for a thesis such as mine, which seeks to respond to what arises from within the individual poems it engages with, not to approach them or their authors with the aim of fitting them into a pre-existing critical/theoretical mold. Nonetheless, it has been important for me to find terminology which both enables me to situate Driskill’s work alongside that of the other two poets I have written on and does not risk eliding its cultural difference. Driskill<sup>2</sup> himself has proposed gender non-conforming as an umbrella term which can be used for Two-Spirit and other Indigenous gender identities that do not fit into the male/female binary; and so, rather than trans-, this is the term I have employed when referring to his work (“Shaking Our Shells” 121).

Given my desire to read the work I was studying in ways that were responsive rather than prescriptive, my methodology has been to ground my evolving ideas in close reading of the poems, not the other way around. The concepts of multiplicity and “becoming” have been key to this approach: the latter term arises frequently in much of the literature I have used as secondary sources, and, most prominently, is central to transgender and queer studies and cyborg theory. This forward-moving idea,

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<sup>2</sup> Driskill gives a helpful way to understand his lived experience as a Two-Spirit Cherokee: “People see me as countless genders including a Queer man, as Gay guy who wears skirts, a Queer woman, a straight woman, a drag queen, a Trans woman, a Trans man, a transvestite, a cross-dresser, an androgynous person, and a straight man. Moving through these spaces has taught me that most of them are deadly dangerous” (“Shaking Our Shells” 128). This illustrates that the category of trans- is not quite right because it would not encompass all these different presentations. These presentations are notably from the lens of the onlooker; Driskill does not clarify his identity beyond Two-Spirit.

which I think of as an aggregation, is not unlike the idea of the rhizome as theorized by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Rhizome theory is modeled on nature, and encompasses the idea of multiplying; Deleuze and Guattari write that, “in nature, roots are taproots with a more multiple, lateral, and circular system of ramification, rather than a dichotomous one” (5). Multiplicity implies layering and building, allowing for a methodology that embraces expansiveness and develops through connection.

With this idea of multiplicity in mind, I have, as mentioned above, brought a wide range of source material and disciplines to bear on close textual analysis of the writing of the three poets examined in this study. The three chapters of this critical project each home in on one of the poets and analyze in depth several of their poems, and a different thematic approach has been used in each case. By this means (rather than, say, arranging the chapters thematically and addressing all three poets in each), I have hoped to preserve and indeed emphasize their personal and artistic distinctiveness, and to convey a critical outlook that is, as is suited to the subject of my thesis, invested in progressive discovery. However, there are of course connections and similarities between the varying approaches and foci of these three poets (and between the drivers of their writing and my own); these will be brought forward for brief examination in the conclusion.

In the first chapter I investigate how Driskill navigates memory, incorporating different strands: cultural, personal and queer. As s/he seeks ways to represent hybrid identities, memory and story are ritualized and recorded through experience and an overlay of different languages in a process of naming: one that is not working towards a fixed, unequivocal point, but is a working out and testing of possibilities. Chapter two examines Tolbert’s use of form in relation to a trans- identity. The restrictive elements of the forms s/he chooses to work with pressurize the language and syntax producing a complex exploration of and play with the trans- subject and narrative. Chapter three focuses on metaphor and the body in Clare’s work. In particular, I apply complementary theories of the body to show the building and layering of identity in the poems and how this ultimately questions the external limits of the physical body.

As Kaval succinctly puts it, trans- and gender non-conforming poets use poetry, “to write the self into being or to bridge the gap between the corporeal and psychic in order to make sense and create a space of comfort out of their otherwise (uncomfortable) interstitial status” (9). The motif of language

falling short of experience characterizes all three bodies of work, as does a fraught relationship with memory and a propensity to figure the self as multiple rather than singular – though I would argue that comfort is not always the end goal. All of these writers put the reader in various levels of discomfort as a means of challenging and confronting boundaries and norms, and to read their work is rarely to have a sense of having arrived at settledness or security. At times discomfort stems from the very sense of multiplicity, and the continuing resistance to any form of singularity, which seems to be their goal, and which is certainly key to what attracts me to their writing. If, then, the work of Driskill, Clare and Tolbert is concerned with building something – each word a bolt, each line a cable – they are never at risk of over-engineering, or of settling for limited and safely reassuring horizons. For a trans- writer, to be immersed in such instability is, paradoxically, to feel that one has “come home.”

## A Fresh Telling: Qwo-Li Driskill

Qwo-Li Driskill<sup>3</sup> identifies as a Cherokee Two-Spirit/Queer writer. Hir writing focuses on language, the complexity of a mixed Native identity, writing as a political act, and troubling gender boundaries.

Craig Lesley has identified six different characteristics of Native American Literature, all of which are present in Driskill's work: the importance of the land; a search for center or balance; a relationship to the past; bitterness towards white culture; a belief in the power of words; and silence (Justice 80). For Driskill, the relationship between some of these categories is fraught as multiple identities struggle against seemingly exclusionary ideas. In an article about Gregory Scofield, a Métis<sup>4</sup> and Two-Spirit identified poet, Driskill articulates the struggle found throughout Scofield's writing, but also in hir own:

Issues of wholeness and division are of major importance to mixedblood writers, who are often dismembered by concepts such as racial purity and blood quantum. To be Native and white often means to feel at war with your own identity. The frustration with feeling otherized by native communities as a Métis person is also a frustration with a racist, colonial, and Indian-hating culture that otherizes him for being Indian. (Driskill, "Call Me Brother" 231)

Throughout Driskill's work, there is an effort to coalesce and contextualize a hybrid<sup>5</sup> identity. As José Esteban Muñoz, a queer scholar in visual studies, argues, fruitful spaces are opened up when fragmented identities are explored and negotiated; Driskill's work illuminates intersectional identities by unweaving and reforming fragments as a means of working towards telling and amplifying the stories of the marginalized (Driskill, "Call Me Brother" 232). Additionally, s/he explores cultural memory through hir poems, both by mapping that memory onto a singular body and by investigating how it (cultural memory) is built, in the process blurring the line between story and memory. Terese Marie Mailhot, a First Nations writer, explains that, "There is a power in the reclamation of story – in the remembrance that these stories are real and tangible things" (Mailhot). This essay will focus on the manner in which memory is performed through the writing, and examine how the elements of Driskill's specific cultural identity

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<sup>3</sup> When referring to Driskill, I will be using the gender-neutral pronouns "hir" and "s/he" as this is how the poet refers to himself.

<sup>4</sup> A Canadian person who is of First Nation and European descent (Canada's First Peoples).

<sup>5</sup> I want the term "hybrid" to encompass its many definitions and connotations. Therefore, I wish to use it with the application of agriculture, cultural blending, and as a composite ("hybrid, n. and adj." OED). I understand hybrid to also mean a type of hyphenation, a continual process of merging, where neither component of the hybrid state remains stagnant. In the conclusion, I relate this latter meaning to Homi Bhabha's definition of hybridity.

inform this; in addition to naming and blurring binaries (cultural, racial, and gender), hybridity produces fresh dynamics in the context of memory.

Driskill deploys a range of different poetic modes to investigate memory, including the genre of elegy. Like many other queer writers, s/he creates new ways for the LGBT+ community to grieve and mythologize their leaders. There are numerous elegies within hir collection, *Walking with Ghosts*: among hir elegiac subjects are Matthew Shepard<sup>6</sup>, a young gay man killed in Wisconsin; Marsha P. Johnson<sup>7</sup>, an important drag/trans- activist present at Stonewall and killed in the 90s; Billy Jack Gaither, a gay man killed in Alabama; and several anonymous friends. In hir elegies, Driskill moves beyond simple memorialization of queer bodies to tell the stories of individuals who are complicated, unique and often erased<sup>8</sup> from view.

Driskill quotes Muñoz on melancholia, a key element in elegy, “[it is] a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names – and in our names” (Driskill, “Call Me Brother” 227). Muñoz defines melancholy in the specific context of black queer bodies, as a “structure of feeling” not divorced from activism (74). He has stepped away from Freud’s earlier definition as pathology and reinterprets the later revision, which de-pathologizes melancholia; he then emphasizes the ordinary occurrence of melancholia in everyday black, queer lives

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew Shepard’s story was big news in the US at the time. It was a national headline and continued to be in the headlines for weeks/months. There is a foundation and several documentaries, along with a Hollywood film about his death – *The Matthew Shepard Story*. His remains were interred in the Washington National Cathedral in 2018 (Hauser).

<sup>7</sup> Marsha P. Johnson was part of the burgeoning trans- activist movement in New York. A co-creator of STAR – Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries – who worked closely with Sylvia Rivera (Stryker 86). More work has recently been done to bring her story to the forefront of trans- history, such as two new documentaries that came out in 2017, amid much controversy over storytelling, plagiarism and authorship (Urquhart).

<sup>8</sup> Erasure is of particular importance to Driskill as Two-Spirit voices “are supposed to be silent or dead” (Driskill, “Call Me Brother” 222). Courtney Dakin explains the politics of Two-Spirits in a Canadian context (while the laws do not apply to the United States, the same sentiment does apply): “Since European colonization, Two-Spirits have been systematically alienated from their identities. Two-Spirit practices were driven underground, and in some cases eliminated. Despite commonly being mentioned in reports made before 1850, by the mid-1800s, Two-Spirit individuals and traditions seemed to have disappeared from record. This means that before the federal government banned all Aboriginal cultural ceremonies in 1925, and even before the racist and sexist Indian Act was passed in 1876, Two-Spirit ceremonies and identities were already near extermination. Although legislation was used as a colonial tool to further prevent Indigenous peoples from practicing traditional healing and spirituality, it was preceded by conversion and forced assimilation to colonial gender norms by missionaries” (Dakin).

Leslie Feinberg found that colonizers up and down the Americas reacted violently to Two-Spirit people by murdering them in grotesque ways. The government forced Two-Spirits, along with other Native children, to go to missionary schools where they were required to conform to normative gender roles and behavior (Feinberg 23-28). Feinberg interviewed several Two-Spirit identified people, one named Chrystos commented that, “The Two-Spirit tradition was suppressed ... like all Native spirituality, it underwent a tremendous time of suppression” (Feinberg 28).

(74). The poetic sequence “Love Poems for Billy Jack” employs Muñoz and Driskill’s understanding of melancholy to imagine the circumstances of Billy Jack’s death in the form of love poems; this approach has the outcome of both challenging the way we think about sexual desire and retelling the story of Billy Jack from a new perspective.

“Love Poems” is a four-part sequence that begins with a transgressive challenge to the reader: “Let’s laugh down / the Alabama sky / warm and moist as / mouths on cock” (Driskill, *Walking with Ghosts* 19). In his essay “The Erotics of Transgression,” Tim Dean defines transgression as something that pushes against boundaries – therefore the definition is fluid and shifts along with social perception. Driskill is pushing boundaries in this opening stanza because s/he sets up an imagined love affair with someone who is known to be already dead. The opening also serves to call attention to the sexual emphasis sustained throughout: it is a warm and joy-filled opening for such a darkly shrouded poem. Another way in which Driskill transgresses with “Love Poems” is through his choice of Billy Jack as a subject. Billy Jack was a white man who was, as the opening line suggests, killed in Alabama – yet the history of race in Alabama is one of violence against non-white people. There is therefore something radical about the context in which Driskill elegizes Billy Jack.

After the second stanza, a tense switch to the past conditional places the poem in the realm of the imaginary, facilitating the possibility of a relationship. This shift imbues the poem with a dynamic, slippery quality because the speaker appears to be both in the past, during the attack on Billy Jack, and in the future, speaking about what they would have done, had they been there; through this shift, we enter the present creation of the poem. Driskill injects violence with intimacy, producing the illusion of a first-hand account of the murderous event. While the reader understands that this is not the memory of what happened, Driskill’s graphic evocation produces the illusion of memory, for example here in the third stanza:

I could have kissed  
your face  
                    pulverized by fists  
legs  
                    splintered by ax handle  
folded into you  
like your living body

The immersion method of storytelling is characteristic of the modern elegy: the speaker does not attempt to cure themselves of grief by resurrecting Billy Jack, but loses themselves in the process of imaginatively reliving Billy Jack's death. As poetry critic Jahan Ramazani states: "Instead of resurrecting the dead in some substitute, instead of curing themselves through displacement, modern elegists 'practice losing farther, losing faster,' so that the "One Art" of the modern elegy is not transcendence or redemption of loss but immersion in it" (4). At the same time, Driskill is reinvigorating Billy Jack<sup>9</sup> in the collective queer memory by elegizing him.

Driskill's method of addressing and engaging with Billy Jack is irregular and breaks boundaries: between memory, myth and fact; between violence and love; and between white cisgendered<sup>10</sup> gay men and mixed-race Two-Spirit queer folk. However, Danez Smith, a poet who engages with elegy, queries its mission, "To only know a person because of their death is something different to being able to really celebrate the life" (Parmar). Perhaps the physical breaks, the caesuras, on the page are intended to visually represent the struggle Smith notes as occurring within an elegist who does not know the victim, in that they could be seen to model hesitation on the speaker's part. Trace Petersen notes that early trans poets were "testing the limits of habitability in poems, emphasizing moments where habitability fails or truth demands a response other than realism" (Peterson 524). In "Love Poems," Driskill implicitly acknowledges potential issues of voyeurism (his own and ours) by troubling the reader's way in: immersion in the violence.

The poem then proceeds to question Billy Jack in a very direct manner: "Did your salty musk / bring goose bumps / Did the way you ran hand through / hair make them catch their breath" (20). These questions intimate the probability that the murderers had repressed desire for Billy Jack; that they were afraid of and threatened by their own feelings about men and therefore "wanted to hear you [Billy Jack] / snap and spark like cedar" (21). By using the word "cedar" Driskill turns this grotesque event into a spiritual practice: cedar is considered a sacred plant by the Cherokee and is used to honor the dead

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<sup>9</sup> Billy Jack Gaither was killed as part of a hate crime in 1999 in Sylacauga, Alabama (Firestone). The story was national news and exposed the way a queer person had to live in the rural South.

<sup>10</sup> "A person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds to his or her sex at birth; of or relating to such a person; not transgendered" ("cisgendered, adj. and n." OED).

(Cherokee Nation). Perhaps this is one of the poem's aims: to build an unsettling empathy with the men who killed Billy Jack within the reader by overlapping calming/safe wording with violence and hate.

The repeated imagery reflects the way Billy Jack was killed, beaten and burned on a pile of tires (Firestone). The images are slippery, chemical and vibrant – they leave a smell on you: “black smoke,” “gold flame,” “dancing flame,” and “molecules exploding.” The bright flame descriptions contrast with the solid repetitions of jewels, “sapphire” and “diamond”; this repetition “problematizes the notion of progress and development” (Mazur ix) as the poem dwells on, rather than working to transcend or move beyond, the death of Billy Jack. This kind of cyclical progress is typical of elegies, which, as Ramazani notes, are highly repetitive. While “Love Poems” is an elegy, it could also be considered to invoke the tradition of the blues. Blues are arguably “an [African American] indigenous literary equivalent to the modern elegy” (Ramazani 138-9). The typical tropes of blues are affirmation, redemption and transcendence, though this does not prescribe a smooth and simple emotional passage: for example, Ramazani notes that Langston Hughes wrote blues “about violent and irresolvable grief” (Ramazani 140-141). While Driskill attempts to resolve his own grief by the concluding line, the repeating imagery and open-ended structure of the poem resist the resolution (Ramazani 135). Throughout, and to the end, the poem affirms Billy Jack's continuing – and bodily – presence to the speaker through sensual language. The final lines return us to the speaker's own body: “You once alive man / burn me / to sky” (Driskill, *Walking with Ghosts* 23). The speaker is asking for immolation by Billy Jack in a moment of transcendence. Through the poem, they re-experience their grief: it is like a ritual that ends with the speaker rendered to another realm, the sky. Yet despite pointing towards transcendence at the last, Driskill's elegy contains an unresolved undercurrent of anger which speaks to the subject of the poem but also points to the complex nature of identity's hold on the body. Billy Jack is both physically loved (by the speaker) and physically broken (by his killers), both of which occur because of his identity, connecting this poem to anger that spurs activism.

Elsewhere, Driskill explores memory in ways that do not always involve the memorialization of specific individuals or groups. Depending how memory functions, is constructed, and operates, is pivotal to Driskill's work; in “Two Approaches to Memory” s/he explores competing interpretations of memory across the two sections of the poem. Throughout the collection, Driskill blurs the boundaries between



different forms of memory: for example, individual and cultural. Perhaps the reason for complicating these boundaries is that, as Anna Reading writes (with specific reference to collective memory): “How memory works – who looks back, who has the authority to look back, who is believed when they look back, who is remembered as witness by those with authority, who is threatened with being forgotten – is complex” (Reading 220). The uncertainty Reading describes pinpoints issues regarding whose memory is “real” or “true” and what version or narrative is reported. However, Maurice Halbwachs says of communicative<sup>11</sup> memory that, “[its] continuous development ... is marked not, as is history, by clearly etched demarcations but only by irregular and uncertain boundaries” (Halbwachs 142). Recognition of collective memory’s instability allows for a more nuanced understanding of Driskill’s speaker’s relationship to memory in “Two Approaches,” which is itself unstable, and may at first glance appear contradictory. Both sections of this poem treat memory as a personified creature or human; however, they employ greatly different structures and tones. The first section blends anglicized Cherokee in rhythmic and almost oral storytelling style and the second section treats memory as if it were a lover.

In this poem, Driskill addresses memory through the conventions of the ode. Her first approach is forceful: s/he uses exclamation points at the end of each thought to emphasize the power of the speaker. The first two lines are a repeated refrain: “Sge, Memory! You are weak! / Ni! Your paths are black!” (73) In Cherokee, “sge” can be either a command to listen or a forceful summons and “ni” means “listen” or “look” (“Cherokee Word List”). By blending English and Cherokee and using an exuberant, sing-song tone, Driskill is playing with the notion of a stereotypical “Native Poem,” one that emphasizes certain aspects of Native culture and repeats a white western understanding of what that culture is. As Patricia Clark Smith, Mima poet and critic, writes, until recently, Native American poetry was translated into archaic English. She elaborates on rhythm in older poems, commenting that they “are marked by a

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<sup>11</sup> Halbwachs actually uses the term “collective memory,” but as Jan Assmann explains, Halbwachs’ term is not the same as that used by other scholars in the field. The field interprets collective memory to be memory held by a group. I am using Assmann’s distinction of “communicative memory” for Halbwachs only (Assmann 109-117). Halbwachs’ delimits “collective memory” from most of the traditions and transferences under “cultural memory.” Assmann explains that, “Communicative memory is non-institutional; it is not supported by any institutions of learning, transmission, and interpretation; it is not cultivated by specialists and is not summoned or celebrated on special occasions; it is not formalized and stabilized by any forms of material symbolization; it lives in everyday interaction and communication and, for this very reason, has only a limited time depth which normally reaches no farther back than eighty years, the time span of three interacting generations” (Assmann 111). However, I will use “cultural memory” and collective memory” more synonymously as, “Cultural memory is a form of collective memory, in the sense that it is shared by a number of people and that it conveys to these people a collective, that is, cultural, identity” (Assmann 110).

strongly rhythmical and repetitive character ... because *any* use of rhythm or repetition served to give the effect of primitiveness” (Smith 104). “Two Approaches” is therefore political and satirical in expression – as, indeed, it is in content, addressing as it does the slipperiness of memory and its capacity to be subservient to the narrative of the strongest, most culturally central voice.

The speaker addresses memory and calls out its weakness, then further explores this through the use of metaphor. The metaphors untangle, in an exaggerated fashion, the idea that the speaker is able to fend off memory. In the first stanza the speaker is a ballplayer who is greased up, allowing them to “slip from your [memory’s] feeble hands!” This points towards the cultural conversation happening within the poem, the blend of Anglo-American culture (baseball) with Native American (Cherokee language). Subsequently, the metaphors become animal. The spider and rattlesnake are referred to as white: “The White Spider / crawls across her web / to swallow your puny corpse!” By using the color white, Driskill makes the comparison to white culture attempting to control what is remembered and how, and shows memory as entrapped. Further, it is ingested and corrupted, so Driskill indicates that its way forward is obscure (“Ni! Your paths are black!”). This poem sits in contrast with both memorializing poems (previously mentioned) and poems in which Driskill enfolds body and land to tell the story of the past (to be addressed later on) as it explores memory in an elusive way and through a mythic tone. I use the term “mythic” here in full consciousness that, as Mailhot explains, “The invention of myth is a white thing.” She further explains that myth is “often used to diminish the dynamism and functions of [the] work [of Native] storytellers and artists” (Mailhot). However, I believe that this is Driskill’s point: to rework, by writing into, the racist discourse surrounding Native poetry. Further, by addressing memory Driskill uses the poem to challenge “who [typically] is allowed to remember” (Reading 220).

When addressing memory in this section, Driskill consistently uses terminology of diminishment: the adjectives “weak,” “feeble,” and “ugly,” and the noun phrase “puny corpse.” The final stanza is one word, “Ha!” which punches at memory without the employ of further epithets. The whole first approach, or section, enacts a strategy for forgetting, but it is an active approach: the speaker is not longing to forget but is actively escaping from the clutches of memory. Furthermore, memory itself is portrayed as a stupid fool, thwarted at every turn. Similarly, in his poem “Thin Silver Notes” Eli Clare, ponders, “Which poems refuse to lie and which / lies tell a truth” (Clare, *The Marrow’s Telling* 11).

In the second section, Driskill changes tack and addresses memory softly. The poem loses rigid structure; there are no exclamation points here and the invocation “O, Memory” suggests sweetness rather than attack. Repetition continues to be central to the poem but there is more space between the repeated phrases and the visual appearance is delicate. “O, Memory” and “Tonight” are repeated and work together, building responsively on and to one another:

O, Memory,  
You sweet,  
heart broken thing.

Tonight I hold  
my genitals softly  
in callused palm,  
whisper your name.

O, Memory,  
You precious,  
trembling thing.

Tonight I forgive you.  
You, inviolable  
and innocent as  
my aching skin.

O, Memory,  
You holy,  
Broken thing. (74)

Again, Driskill deploys an ode-like repeated address. The stanzas that begin “O, Memory” set up metaphors for memory – they impute fragility and brokenness. The following stanzas (beginning with “Tonight”) describe an interaction between speaker and addressee. The relationship is one of desire as the speaker whispers memory’s name and likens it to “aching skin.” In this section, memory is still associated with weak words, like “trembling” and “broken,” though it is notable that it is also described as “inviolable” – an interesting juxtaposition as this suggests it cannot be destroyed, yet it is also deemed to be “broken.” An odd dynamic is then created: while the first section is about pushing memory away, this is about bringing it close. The poem closes with the lines, “I am ready now / to hold you / as my own,” as the speaker takes ownership. As previously noted, the memory of marginalized peoples is often denied or forgotten by the oppressor (Wagner), marking this poem as a meditation on reclamation. At first, the speaker of “Two Approaches” attempts to evade memory and deny its reality, but subsequently memory is embraced and owned. While Driskill’s wrestling with memory is clearest in this poem, which

anthropomorphizes memory, allowing the speaker to grapple with it in a physically realized way, the overall purpose of his work is to record a history in the form of story. However, this act of recording is not straightforward but incorporates serial self-questioning, alternatively validating and invalidating itself. The uncertain and irregular boundaries Halbwachs ascribes to communicative memory are paralleled in Driskill's approach to writing poetry, where memory, story, art and identity circle one another, jostling and coexisting uncomfortably in the poems' frames.

The writing of minority identity is tied in with the cultural memory of the group. So much of identity is wrapped up in sociocultural context that, when that history is lost, the individual's identity can be felt to be under threat, too. Driskill uses the sonnet form to write the narrative of a mixed-race speaker in "High Yella Sonnet." Antonella Francini describes African American sonnets, a tradition with which this poem can be seen to have a relationship, as creating "a space ... [in] which a single voice launched an appeal to an implied audience in the attempt to elicit a reply or a reaction" (37). Francini then outlines the tradition of resistance these sonnets engage with, "Tradition is resumed, appropriated and subverted by a strong poetical subject who transforms the established lyrical canons" (44). "High Yella Sonnet" entangles African American resistance writings with Native identity because the speaker is read as part black and part Native. As Dean Rader, poet and American Indian studies scholar, notes, Native poets who write in English have chosen to do so and have also accessed a Western education that brings with it the poetic traditions of that language (Rader 123). Within these contexts, it is evident that the choice of form and diction in "High Yella Sonnet" is a deliberate troubling of cultural boundaries – this can be seen from the title alone, an announcement of a mixed-race voice. "High Yella" has multiple meanings, one of which is a derogatory racist/classist phrase meaning someone who has any black ancestry ("high, adj and n.2." OED).

Driskill uses the Shakespearean form of the sonnet as the frame in and through which to explore this identity, this body. The poem starts out without judgement or any overt tone, simply describing a person getting ready: "Every mornin I pull plastic comb through thick / copperbrown curls" (26). Driskill divides the sonnet up into quatrains with a final couplet. The line lengths vary, echoing the tracing finger s/he mentions at the end of the first quatrain:

Every morning I pull plastic comb through thick  
copperbrown curls, stare at a face

ancestors kissed n colored with a trick  
of high yella light. My index finger trace

The poem moves from the simplicity of its opening to a slowed down confrontation with the self in the mirror: “stare at a face / ancestors kissed n colored with a trick / of high yella light” (26). The speaker is now crowded with familial heritage – looking in the mirror alone, but also feeling that ancestral lineage behind them. By breaking the line on “trick,” Driskill emphasizes the double meaning in the words “trick of high yella light.” A trick of light signals something that appears to be there but is not; coupled with the multiple meanings of “high yella,” this phrasing implies the speaker’s identity is complex and, ultimately, elusive.

At the shift of stanzas, Driskill employs what I will call a soft turn – the poem shifts slightly to a more abstract vision of the body. The finger trace is forgotten as Driskill omits the markers that would signal which descriptions map onto what parts of the speaker’s body:

my body’s cedar n ebony trails  
to colonization’s pale n puffy scars: a steel bit  
in my mouth, shinin web of rails  
construct to open my interior, rivers covered in grit

Driskill names colonization and the pain it has put on the speaker’s body. The way in which s/he expresses this, as physical trauma, is something s/he continually points towards and worries at throughout the collection. Pain resists language in an essential way: “To bring it [pain] to language is to do something of mythological proportion: it is to repeat the work of Babel, and, perhaps, also its folly” (Fifield 119). Metaphorically the scars and steel bit attempt to describe bodily physical pain; however, this likely also bleeds into emotional pain that is more easily represented as something physical. This moment in Driskill’s poem is an illustration of Édouard Glissant’s theory of interweaving opacities. Glissant defines opacity as an irreducible alterity (Glissant 115). He posits that, “Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics” (Glissant 190). Driskill’s speaker presents the confluence of at least two opacities in the phrase, “construct to open my interior,” an odd turn of phrase that suggests the pain has moved inwards as the white part of the speaker’s identity harms the parts that are culturally different.

In the penultimate stanza the poem hybridizes language, switching from more vernacular diction to fuller conventional structures. For example, the shift is noticeable in the lines, “Yella as gold stole from my homelands. / My blood aint subterranean, / I bear pockmarks of forged treaties, iron brands.”

Driskill explores discomfort in hybridity through language here, but his uses of the word “hybrid” are fluid, centering on different elements in different poems. Within this poem, it is employed in an agricultural context as well; the speaker’s skin is “hybrid corn n sweet potato.” However, “hybrid is a usefully slippery category ... an evocative term for the formation of identity ... it is code for creativity and for translation ... the key organizing feature of the cyborg ... invokes mixed technological innovations ... [and] the process of cultural mixing” (Kalra et al. 70-71). “High Yella Sonnet” quickly shifts from referring to a scientific process to a cultural hybridity. Driskill points the poem towards the complex relationship between body, land, culture and industry, thus enabling the mixed identity of the speaker to hold myriad tensions: between culture, physical embodiment and their relationship to conflicting practices and beliefs. These tensions result in a construction and deconstruction of the body, creating a space of continual collision.

As the sonnet unfolds it becomes more direct, as if angling itself towards the implied audience Francini posits. At the turn, the tone is triumphant: “You call me watered down, say my peoples good as dead. / I laugh n stand before you, fullblood high yella, black n red” (26). The closing couplet punches exasperatedly, expressing, and attempting to educate the reader about, the intersectional warring that occurs on and within the body of a mixed-race person. The speaker of the poem is part black, Native, and Caucasian, evident in the last three words of the poem where Driskill boils race down to color words, leaving no room for misinterpretation of a mixed-race experience.

Driskill also works with the haiku form; whereas the sonnet derives from the Western literary canon, the haiku connotes Japan, minimalist language and condensed thought, imagery and imagism, and spiritual practice. These poems – there are several in *Walking with Ghosts* – are like little bursts of breath beside Driskill’s longer poems or sequences. They add silence – one of the characteristics of Native American Literature as identified by Lesley. Lesley defines silence as both a preference for brevity and a connection to the mystery of Native culture (501). The haiku, then, although derived from outside Native culture and literature, is a form sympathetic to the emphases of both. By working with it, Driskill again models a blending of cultures; the roots of the haiku in the collaborative renga are also instructive in this regard.

Peter Harris outlines the four classical characteristics of the haiku, “the use of natural image, the 5-7-5 syllabic grouping, the seasonal reference, and the caesura ... The 5-7-5 pattern is now widely ignored because syllables in Japanese are shorter than in English” (Harris 279). “Summer Haiku,” one of four in the collection, calls itself a haiku and uses abbreviated text-like speak:

Been thinkin bout words  
n the way yr hand  
cups my belly like water     (24)

Driskill opts for a non-classical syllable grouping of 5-5-7, which, although not syllabically symmetrical, produces a symmetrical appearance. This works against the expected shape in English, which would typically give two shorter lines sandwiching the longer seven-syllable line. The title refers to a season; however there are no temporal markers within the body of the text. Primarily, the poem articulates a comparison between words and sensual touch.

As Driskill has chosen to write a haiku that draws attention to spelling, aural pronunciation and the way language is processed, some context about how the brain processes language will inform the reading of this short poem. Walter J. Ong writes on orality and on how oral language and written language affect one another: his work is useful here because he articulates the ways in which language and language processes evolve as writing is introduced (Native American languages have been primary oral<sup>12</sup> languages more recently than English). While “Summer Haiku” itself is written and there is no mention of the sound quality of words, to think about words, as the speaker states they have been doing, is also to think about their sonic properties. Ong states that, “with writing, the mind is forced into a slowed-down pattern that affords it the opportunity to interfere with and reorganize its more normal, redundant processes” (40). “Summer Haiku” might be seen to embody this statement.

The manner in which some of the words in the poem are spelled allows for different word associations. For example, the word “about” is abbreviated to “bout.” Via this spelling, additional meanings are carried through such as a short period of intense activity or a curve in a musical instrument (“bout, n. 2.” OED). Although these meanings are not foregrounded in the poem, exploring them is a means of examining the written language in the elongated way Ong mentions. The spelling of “bout” also

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<sup>12</sup> Primary orality is the orality of a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print. This kind of language virtually does not exist anymore (Ong 11). Secondary orality is new orality sustained by technology that depends on writing and print (Ong 11).

helps emphasize the words “thinkin” and “belly” and effectively conflates thought and sensory perception. This conceptual hybridization is another technique by means of which Driskill delivers complexity to the reader.

The second line loses the fluidity due to text-speak (quoted page 99). It is staccato to the eye rather than aurally, because the spelling differences are what are most pronounced. “And” is reduced to a single letter, “n,” and “your” is missing its vowels. The poem invites the reader to meditate on specific words and sounds or letters, as Ong suggests. The letter “y” is also highlighted by Driskill’s technique, so that the words “way,” “yr,” “my,” and “belly” stand out. The lines are reminiscent of a text message, indicating a particular pronunciation of the words; the truncated words also serve to produce a visibly shorter line. The spelling of the words as phonetic pronunciations indicates Driskill’s interest in language change and how one is shaped by, and experiences the world through, their learned way of speaking. Ong states that the way language works is “first, thought and its verbal expression in oral culture ... second, literate thought and expression in terms of their emergence from and relation to orality” (Ong 1). This poem is in English, but not Standard English, signaling a bridge between oral language and written.

The final line of the poem has no word abbreviations. It is sensual and intimate, revealing the image of the addressee’s hand cupping the speaker’s belly the way that water does. The image invites embrace, both from an intimate partner and from the natural world. As Ong writes, “The body is a frontier between myself and everything else” (72); we interpret the world through our bodily sensations. Driskill effectively creates something new with this haiku by colliding the physicality of the body with thought; what is enacted here is a merging of oral hybridization and the bodily.

Driskill again uses the body as a vehicle for transformative hybridity in “Map of the Americas.” This poem follows the conflicted emotional landscape of the speaker (a Native American) as they negotiate their feelings of desire towards their (Caucasian) lover and their own ancestral pain. The second page of the poem shifts to a shape poem<sup>13</sup> where the words create a visual map of the Americas: North, South and Central. In her essay “Poems as Maps in American Indian Women’s Writing,” Janice Gould, Koyangk’auwi Maidu writer and scholar, explores how poems can function as maps in Native women’s poetry, “No map can really tell us all we need to know, and a map made of language – as all maps are –

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix for the text of this portion of the poem.



must necessarily be an imperfect rendering despite the poet's attempts to mark the way" (Gould 33).

While Driskill is not writing from an exclusively female perspective, Gould's reflections offer an interesting insight into the way in which maps are bound together with linguistic and physical markers. In "Map of the Americas," the map not only entwines both language and cartography, but the body also becomes a literal map. The lines that lead to the shift in form explicitly signal this to the reader: "Look: my body curled and asleep / becomes a map of the Americas" (9). This is, then, almost overegged by the turn of the page and the appearance of the "word map."

"Map of the Americas" works on several different levels. As a whole poem (of which the map is only part), it is about lovers and the imbalance of power between them. It focuses on intimate moments and how they, at times, overwhelm the speaker, becoming tarnished by a history of pain and violence. Driskill begins, "I wish when we touch / we could transcend history in / double helixes of dark and light / on wings we build ourselves." The speaker aches for an ahistorical moment, where love exists outside of racial context and the act of being together is as simple as two bodies making love. The speaker is, however, constrained by their cultural memory and pain; the theories of both pain and cultural memory are complex and are reflected in the poem in the conceptual language of history and double helixes. Writing of exile, Glissant states that, "The conquered or visited peoples are ... forced into a long and painful quest after an identity whose first task will be opposition to the denaturing process introduced by the conqueror" (17). This is the process with which the speaker of "Map of the Americas" and its author are engaged.

As tender and hopeful as the opening stanza is, the second quickly upends that hope: "But this land grows volcanic / with the smoldering hum of bones." These lines paint the land as dark and brimming with emotion, a metaphorical exploration of imperialism within the Americas. The speaker cannot remain in the moment and instead is fully consumed by their ancestral past with its turbulent history of atrocity and repression, and the conflict that their current actions create within themselves. This poem is an example of Rader's concept of the epic lyric:

These poems possess most or all of the major characteristics of the epic – they transmit cultural traditions, they valorize deeds, they form national identities, and they preserve culturally specific linguistic patterns – within the more accessible and acceptable model of the lyric.

.....

Traditionally where the epic poem is objective, the lyric is subjective; where the epic is public, the lyric is private; where the epic concentrates on deeds and events, the lyric explores emotions and feelings. And, particularly important for Native American storytelling, the epic is generally narrative or linear, whereas the lyric remains notably nonlinear. Thus, to capture the nonlinearity of much of Native telling, the lyric, ironically, is a more appropriate vehicle than the confining narrativity of the epic. (Rader 128-129)

While the strict division Rader posits between the varying qualities and emphases of epic and lyric might well be open to question as a generalized statement, the idea of the epic lyric is useful when considering this poem in which Driskill expands the lyric subject beyond one individual speaker and grounds them in a wider cultural community. According to Rader, the epic lyric is a possible cultural hybrid of storytelling and written poetry, while Culler describes what occurs in the lyric as “subjectivity coming to consciousness of itself through experience and reflection” (Culler 92). Driskill layers the interiority of the speaker’s mind over an epic-style framework, which “tells a culture about itself, about its deepest hopes and fears” (O’Neill 125).

The poem notes moments which are not grounded in specific historical contexts: “the hum of bones” seems to refer to people dead long enough that their bare bones rattle or hum against one another; “men who watched beloveds / torn apart by rifles” could refer to any point of white western invasion of the Americas which resulted in mass death. The timelessness has the quality of traditional storytelling and is reflected in both the mention of “Grandmothers singing” and the image of “children who didn’t live / long enough to cradle a lover,” where the act of lovemaking is compared to river cane basket weaving. Laurence Langer uses the term ‘durational time’<sup>14</sup> when talking about collective memory. This kind of time is defined as non-chronological, as a temporal condition in which the “past disrupts the present and is reexperienced in the telling” (A. Whitehead 188). The speaker of “Map of the Americas” continually re-experiences that which has happened before: the moment of lovemaking triggers a response based on historical context and ancestral lineage. When the poem moves to the speaker representing a physical map of the Americas and the shape changes, it allows the reader to understand how the speaker conceives of the reach of their own body.

The map moves down the page from the northern reaches of Canada, which is conflated with the speaker’s hair “spread upon        the pillow,” to the tip of Argentina and Chile – seen here as the

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<sup>14</sup> Langer did not coin this term, but applies it to collective memory.

speaker's feet "that reach / to touch / Antarctica" (10). The sensual language continues in the bodily descriptions, but it is intertwined with the landscape. Driskill connects the body to both geography and the animal kingdom, but also to industrialized spaces such as mines. By dint of being mapped onto geographical locations and language, the Native body (that is, the speaker's) experiences conquest in a myriad of ways. In the beginning it is through sight as the speaker asks the addressee to look at their body and how it is a map. Then, around where Central America is, the speaker asks:

...Do you  
notice the deserts  
and green  
mountains  
on my belly's  
topography  
or the  
way  
my  
hips  
rise  
like  
ancient pyramids

Again, the addressee is invited to look and take in the speaker's body with wonder. While the display of the body is exotic, it is also commonplace; the mountains are generic, the deserts unnamed – but it is implied that the onlooker seeks to possess them. This part of the map is the thinnest: the lines are single words, and, consequently, maximal emphasis is placed on them. Driskill locates the hips here, in Central America – the connecting land mass parallels an area of the body that is vulnerable to exploitation. There are a few other poems in the collection which address themes of sexual assault and abuse: "On Hearing Another Friend Was Raped," "Gay Nigger Number One," "Story," and "Night Terrors." This is not the core focus of this poem; however, there are subtle allusions to consent and the imbalance of power within "Map of the Americas."

The final section of the poem returns in non-linear narrative fashion to the consensual sexual act. The speaker announces how they perceive this:

When your hands travel  
across my hemispheres  
know these lands  
have been invaded before  
and though I may quiver  
from your touch  
there is still a war (11)

While the reference to the body's "hemispheres" is playful, these lines primarily emphasize invasion.

Driskill's use of the word "touch" as something both soft and war-like creates a paradox: touch is at once intimate and destructive, welcome and painful. The poem straddles the space of epic and lyric as the intimate cross-cultural relationship is layered on top of the recounted story of a people; and, just as the speaker cannot settle with the addressee, the poem sprawls and grows beyond the lyric frame, touching on themes and elements typical of the epic.

The word sovereign is used in the poem: "that I allow you to slip between / my borders / rest in the warm valleys / of my sovereign body." This is the moment at which the speaker asserts themselves and begins working to rebalance the power relationship between the lovers. The concept of sovereignty is important within Native communities, as they have been denied sovereignty over their land, "Sovereignty is a declaration of a necessary inner dignity, power, and trust, as well as a declaration – however difficult – of unbroken connection to our Mother Earth" (Gould 25). The stanza in which these lines appear details the ways in which the speaker is willing to offer up their land/body to their lover. There is a cautionary note, however: "These gifts could be misconstrued / as worship / Honor mistaken for surrender." The poem continues to remind the addressee that they and the speaker are culturally distinct. Particular differences are exemplified by terms like "notice" or "think" which emphasize the work the lover needs to do. The penultimate and final stanzas are presented as single lines for emphasis: "Honor this // I walk out of genocide to touch you." Driskill places the agency back into the hands of the speaker: with the word "walk," it becomes their choice, though a choice that remains embroiled with their cultural memory. Even when the speaker finally has agency, they are unable to forget what has happened to their culture and people.

Another poem which probes the pervasiveness of cultural memory is "Evening With Andrew Jackson." The speaker, a Native person, imagines a world in which the seventh president has risen from the grave. The poem works through the silent, voiceless presence of Jackson, cataloging the things his influence has affected – most prominently the treatment of Native communities and their culture.

The poem has a sarcastic edge to it; it begins like the answer to a college application essay question, the one about the famous people you would like to sit down with over the course of a cozy evening. The second stanza is a great example of that cold wit:

He looks good for being  
 dead for so long, so I decide to let him in.  
 I figure he's taken everything,  
 so what do I have to lose? (58)

The opening stanza starts with Jackson knocking on the front door of the speaker's house, without saying a word – a kind of echo-in-miniature of white Europeans sailing to the Americas and crossing the thresholds of those countries. This poem is fully punctuated in a conventional style, which is noteworthy as Driskill normally does not use punctuation, although his work is syntactically correct. Here Driskill uses “proper” punctuation, which signals a level of formality and adds breadth to the stylistic options explored in the collection, when read alongside the poems previously discussed in this chapter. It further supports the essay feel and exemplifies technical mastery.

Jackson is described sparingly, “His fingers open from / his rotting palm like gray dead trees.” Only his hands are described, though the hands seem metonymic of his whole figure. Because Jackson's face is on the twenty-dollar bill, he is both ubiquitous – his person is within the common knowledge of US society – and always in green-scale. Driskill has turned the fruitful image of Jackson (green; prosperous) into one that is decayed but equally larger than life; Jackson's fingers are compared to trees, which makes him enormous. The historical context of Jackson's relationship with Native tribes is important as he was the president who started the seizure of land from tribes in the South and began the process of removal (Hicks). The Cherokee tried to negotiate with Jackson and the US government through diplomacy but eventually were overpowered and marched along what is now called the Trail of Tears to current day Oklahoma; they lost roughly 4,000 people during the deadly trek (Hicks).

The Trail of Tears is represented within the poem by “blood like satin ribbons / trailing across sidewalks.” This act of forced removal is the beginning of trauma for the Native community within the poem. Driskill blends the past and the present using durational time to show history's connection to the ribbons as they flow into the present day. Now racism is veiled within cultural appropriation: “Red lines flow from the sign at Mohawk Carpets, / trickle from bottles of Arizona Iced Tea chilled on gas station / shelves / and curdle in the Land O Lakes Butter in the / dairy section of the grocery store.” All of the corporations mentioned in these lines have benefited from using Native images as part of their advertising campaigns or logos. Mohawk Carpets have taken the name of the Mohawk tribe, Arizona Iced Tea has a malt liquor with Crazy Horse on its logo (Reuthling), and Land O Lakes uses a stereotypical

image of a Native woman. As the stanza progresses the red lines become more and more destructive. At first, they simply flow from the sign, then they leak from the iced tea and finally they “curdle” the butter.

The poem proceeds to explore more instances of sublimated racism: “a Florida Seminole t-shirt,” a Super Walmart, a Presbyterian church and finally the observation of a two-year-old girl who, on seeing the speaker’s Native mother, remarks crudely that “She’s an Indian and she has a braid.” The innocence of this statement is amplified by the context of the corporate and social markers that culminate in the voice of the girl. The sports team represents basic appropriation of a tribe name, similar to Mohawk mentioned previously. Walmart itself is a symbol of what the United States has become: fast consumerism that has hurt small storeowners, artisans and rural areas, and ignores the vulnerable, whatever their race, identity, ability or class (Rushe). Specifically, the company Walmart has disturbed or destroyed numerous Indigenous people’s sites both nationally and internationally to build its stores (Sturgis). The Church, in general, waged a different kind of war with Natives, trying to “civilize savages” by bringing them to the Christian faith. For example, in California the Catholic Church missions came in to Native areas and used Native people as slave labor to build and to convert people to their faith (Reynolds). The young girl’s mother’s failure to respond to what her daughter says exposes sublimated racism towards Native Americans. Paula Gunn Allen, Laguna Pueblo poet and critic, gives an account of life as a contemporary Native American: “A contemporary American Indian is always faced with a dual perception of the world: that which is particular to American Indian life, and that which exists ignorant of that life” (Allen 149). The girl is hidden “behind the legs of her mother and whispers” the phrase, which suggests she knows it is not quite the right thing to say.

The poem then turns to meditate on the future, as seen through the lens of the present: the penultimate stanza opens, “These strands stretch on forever” (59). Driskill brings back the active autonomy of the ribbons: they creep into the speaker’s uncle’s beer, which is a clear reference to the high rate of alcoholism within Native communities<sup>15</sup>. Further, they “[twist] themselves / through IVs at the local hospital / where a young brown man / waits for protease inhibitors.” Driskill writes that “AIDS is a

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<sup>15</sup> The history of alcohol and Native Americans is complex, but begins in the sixteenth century. Peter Mancall explains that stereotypical imperialist assumptions cloud the perception society has of Native drinking habits (Mancall 92). He posits that first contact with strong spirits combined with the complexity of European diplomacy, disease, and land grabs resulted in higher alcoholism in Native communities (Mancall 92, 101).

pandemic that severely affects Native communities, particularly because our communities are so small. AIDS mirrors a history in which Native communities have been devastated by disease” (Driskill, “Call Me Brother” 227). To contextualize Driskill’s statement, Native communities (as well as other minority communities) are disproportionately affected by the high-risk factors for contracting HIV/AIDS: poverty, alcoholism, limited access to healthcare, and IV drug use (Vernon, “Prevention” S97). The CDC reports that 1% of those affected with HIV/AIDS are Native American, although that number is considered inaccurate due to reporting problems; however, since the 1980s the rates of cases have skyrocketed in minority populations and plummeted in Caucasians (Vernon, “Native American Women” 353). There has been no attempt on the government’s part to change priorities or help minority communities (Vernon, “Prevention” S97). Driskill is bringing a lesser-heard narrative of AIDS to prominence and pointing out the devastation that the Native American community continues to experience. From here the poem moves into a cathartic song sung by the young man’s grandmother. The song is first written in anglicized Cherokee and then translated below. In English, it reads, “Blood Blood / Remember” and thus connects the blood-borne disease with the bloody trail that Jackson has left behind him. Similar to “Map of the Americas,” where history becomes an active part of the present, the grandmother sings the past into the present. The added layer is that the speaker is performing what the grandmother is asking for in her song.

Part of the power of the song she sings derives from the fact that it is written in Cherokee. Unlike other poems in which Driskill uses Cherokee words,<sup>16</sup> “Evening With Andrew Jackson” uses conventional punctuation and grammar. By bringing in Cherokee, Driskill generates tension between the different languages, oral versus written. Like many other Native poets, Driskill finds it important to use her own languages while writing poetry. S/he says, “The use of our languages is a radical act, especially considering the violent history that means many of our languages are endangered or not spoken at all” (Driskill, “Call Me Brother” 223). The Cherokee words function as a pause within the poem, and as an instance of opacity: the Cherokee is an irreducible entity within the poem, signaling resistance (Glissant 191). Visually, the lines in Cherokee are much shorter and confront the non-Cherokee-speaker with

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<sup>16</sup> There are no notes within the collection to explain what Native language is used; I have done my best to confirm that Cherokee is used but that may not always be the case.

estrangement. To return to Glissant's thoughts on conquered peoples (that those who have experienced "visiting" by another group, or some form of Imperialism, are in continual search for an identity forged in "opposition to the denaturing process introduced by the conqueror"): Driskill's use of Cherokee is an assertion and announcement of identity that returns us to the humanity of the speaker.

The poem could end here; however, it continues into a final stanza in which it circles back to Jackson. This stanza opens with Jackson's hands, "When I get home Jackson's hands / are rubbing together with the crack / of kindling." Early in the poem, Driskill characterizes Jackson as a decaying wooden man, silent and ghost-like. The image of Jackson has shifted from the beginning where his hands were dead trees, to the potential for ignition. The line that follows gives him a yet more active role, "He is thinking of so much / more." Perhaps the purpose of Jackson appearing both docile and murderous is that he embodies something that cannot be trusted, similar to sublimated racism that exists beneath the guise of ignorance and bubbles below the surface. Trees, which could be life-giving, are decaying and dead; they are then turned into destructive fuel. Driskill mutes Jackson to strip him of agency; however, his power is still evident in what he has influenced, according to the poem's logic. The poem ends by returning to concepts relevant to Jackson's original focus: "He is writing a New Age book. / He is making a dream catcher. / He is mining minerals from the Black Hills. / He is leaving trails across the continent." It is a hopeless end, one that brings the reader back to the echo of the grandmother's voice and the idea of remembering. Through "Evening With Andrew Jackson," Driskill offers a contextual telling of marginalized history. This history is complicated in the way that Reading illuminates; "who looks back, who has the authority to look back, who is believed when they look back ... is complex" (Reading 220).

Driskill is a poet challenged by articulating memory, cultural identity, sexual and gender identity and the question of how to speak these truths to the world. In his poems, s/he troubles categorization by engaging with hybridity and its many applications. His work is rich with imagery of the land and the body; it is rich with the stories that Driskill believes need to be told. Driskill believes that "poetry is a tool for social change and healing. Poetry is one of the many ways we tell our stories and encourage others to loosen their tongues – our stories are transformative" (Driskill, "Call Me Brother" 222).



## “Closed” Forms and Open Strategies: TC Tolbert

*And where language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundation for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.*

*Audre Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury”*

TC Tolbert, a trans-, genderqueer poet, uses the metaphor of the bridge to explore gender non-conformity, spatial experimentalism and form. Tolbert’s first full-length collection is called *Gephyromania*, which means “the addiction or obsession with bridges”; this title proposes a metaphorical structure which is referenced in many of the poems (Atkinson). When referring to Tolbert, I will be using both gender-neutral and traditional pronouns – ‘s/he’ and ‘he’ – as this is his preference. The ideas Tolbert explores are often articulated through variations on traditional forms, and such poems push against their chosen formal vehicles in order to express the incompleteness language offers the writer and the reader. Lyn Hejinian, a Language<sup>17</sup> poet, explains that language often falls short of its desired effect: “Writing’s initial situation, its point of origin, is often characterized and always complicated by opposing impulses in the writer and by a seeming dilemma that language creates and then cannot resolve” (Hejinian, “The Rejection of Closure”). Or as Felix Bernstein, contemporary poet and son of Charles Bernstein (another Language poet), puts it, summarizing Katerina Kolosova’s ideas: “we never have access to the real in and of itself but only through the bars of language” (Bernstein 42). Tolbert’s attempts to express the difficulty of gender are inherently hampered by his choice of medium, i.e. language. However, by exploring and reworking forms such as the sonnet crown, he creates “open texts” as these are defined by Hejinian:

The open text is one which both acknowledges the vastness of the world and is formally differentiating. It is form that provides an opening ... In the ‘open text’, meanwhile, all the elements of the work are maximally excited; here it is because ideas and things exceed (without deserting) argument that they have taken into the dimension of the work. (Hejinian, “The Rejection of Closure”)

Through its play of language and its testing of the formal parameters it deploys, Tolbert’s work opens the text, a practice which both engages and bewilders the reader. It is important to note that Language poetry was conceived of in direct opposition to fixed forms such as the sonnet, which writers like Hejinian would consider paradigmatically “closed.” I set the theory behind Language poetry next to Tolbert’s work

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<sup>17</sup> Also commonly referred to as L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets (Morgan 151).

to show that the work is open despite and indeed because of the constrictions his chosen forms impose. This essay will explore the ways in which form expands understanding of the subject, perhaps even creates new subjects, in Tolbert's poems.

*Gephyromania* contains two sonnet crowns, "Beg Approval" and "(ir)Retrieval." Both crowns loosely follow the form of a sonnet sequence; however, the connecting last and first lines are often only referential if not altogether different. Many of the sonnets do contain rhyme, but do not adhere to a rhyme scheme, and often these rhymes are only visual and not auditory, or else they are masked by the enjambment and thrust of the sentence. For example, in the second sonnet in "Beg Approval" the 'ing' words ending two of the lines do not chime strongly:

Because the beginning  
of most things feels so much like the end. Praise  
the collapsed body of a dog licking  
its genitals. Praise self sufficiency (72).

Heather Dubrow defines the crown as, "a series of either seven or fourteen sonnets in which the last line of one becomes the first line of the next one, a poetic technique of repetition known as *concatenatio*; the whole group then ends on what had been the first line of the first poem" (Dubrow 31). The only unqualified sonnet rule Tolbert follows is that the constituent poems have fourteen lines. In "(ir)Retrieval," s/he is more playful with the form, deleting lines and using white space to create the same visual sonnet length as other poems in the sequence. This crown opens with a fairly basic example of deletion, "That \_\_\_\_\_ was born Melissa Dawn Tolbert, December 24, 1974" (17) but by the penultimate sonnet so much deletion has been performed that the form is more suggested than realized:

(So that there is at least one flag you will never know the weight of.)  
  
(So that the chair has many permutations.)  
  
(So that you move forward as if through a jump-rope.  
The handles molesting your hands.) (22)

Both sequences process ideas of division and connection through a stream of consciousness or associative thought process.

Although Tolbert dispenses with many of the sonnet's physical traits, his writing inhabits some of the form's traditional territories of exploration: "Shakespeare wrote in the Petrarchan tradition (itself indebted to Platonism), which had developed by his time into a sophisticated tool for exploring the

psychological unfolding of desire for an unattainable beloved” (Bozorth 204). Tolbert has an obsession with folds, or at least, with what is revealed by unfolding; this motif surfaces throughout his work. One of his chapbooks, a portion of which is reproduced in *Gephyromania*, is titled *territories of folding*. A more abstract concept of bridging also connects to a fold: when something is folded what was one thing can be seen to become two, which are at once connected and separated by the crease. While this link may seem far-fetched, bridges and folds both offer a means to move from one place or thing to another, and within themselves they both embody liminal places of transition. For example, some references to folding and bridging within the two crowns are: “(That what we believe in is a form of refraction. That back turning / as a word, upon itself. Draping the neck into sound.)” and “Because you never knew which way to fold / your napkin” (17, 72). Defined as “the action of distorting an image by viewing through a medium,” (“refraction” Merriam-Webster) refraction can be viewed, in the context of belief, as a warping of reality. Parentheses are used regularly in “(ir)Retrieval,” and operate as the folds between thoughts or a means of bridging connections to pertinent details intentionally omitted from the sonnets.

“Beg Approval” probes aspects of desire: how the self wants to present itself; how the desire to project a particular self-image can complicate the self’s access to the world; how desire is both selfish and selfless; and how it is bound up with compulsion. Tolbert employs anaphora throughout the sequence, repeatedly commencing sentences with the explanatory “because” and the hortatory “praise.” These repetitions function as a means to link the sonnets together conceptually and sonically, but also to suggest causality, and to gesture towards Tolbert’s Pentecostal upbringing.

The opening lines entwine religion, sexual desire, and position: “Because the only view we have is the one / that looks down on the knees. Praise perspective” (71). The speaker is in a folded position, as if in prayer, but what unspools after this is not a prayer (although it has the intonations): it is perhaps an opaque confession. This opening is rephrased at the end of the crown and twisted to more obviously allude to sexual desire, “Praise the view from above you as you fall to your knees” (77). Tolbert frames the whole sequence around the physical hinge of the knee; this is the fold line that is bent and unbent throughout the crown and allows Tolbert to merge desire as it manifests in the body and mind or spirit.

Tolbert writes about the knees frequently, “The knees are very important to me as a site of resistance and surrender ... Yes – it seems to me there is something about one’s relationship to the knees

that insinuates gender (or at least gendered expectations) in all of the ways ... listed – penance, submission, pleasure” (Soto). The body is a site of desire but also of religious experience, specifically manifested in the knees. But as the crown and the individual sonnets reach out into all of these rich associations, they also resist conclusion.

By relying on such powerfully repetitious anaphora, Tolbert invokes an incessant prayer. The incantatory refrains clash with the more reflective qualities of the sonnet: “To begin with, sonnets are so often not only located in a present moment but locked within it: they involve obsessive meditations from which the speaker cannot escape” (Dubrow 35). Tolbert ultimately achieves both a claustrophobic intensity in the crown, and a meditative space. Take the first sonnet and how it leverages between “praise” and “because”:

Because the only view we have is the one  
that looks down on the knees. Praise perspective.  
Praise shared disdain. Praise space made by connective  
tissue; the synaptic cleft; elbowroom  
at the dinner table; polite conversation;  
lies you push through your teeth. Because dissecting  
a dog’s heart won’t change the way it thinks. Praise redirected  
traffic. Praise the gnarled lip that defends  
the gentle bones. Because your mother was  
a seahorse. And to think of her thin is  
to empty all the ice from the tea glasses;  
to strain the soup by driving it through your hand.  
Praise tablecloths; sway-back chairs; the plastic  
folds that protect slice after slice of cheese. (71)

The variation of sentence structure and punctuation patterns slows down and speeds up the lines, creating a discordant sound. However, the repetition is the driving force. Gertrude Stein’s<sup>18</sup> theory of repetition is that, “there can be no repetition because the essence of that expression is insistence, and if you insist you must each time use emphasis and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis” (288). Therefore, each instance of “because” or “praise” both reads newly and responds to the previous iterations; both sonic resonance and meaning are (or appear to be) gradually built up.

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<sup>18</sup> Edwin Morgan argues that Stein was a precursor to Language poetry, “As their title suggests, the ‘language’ poets want to foreground language at the expense of other components, including character, plot and argument. Among their ancestors they include Gertrude Stein and the Russian Futurists like Kruchonykh and Khlebnikov...But the difference between Stein and the ‘language’ poets is that they take her argument further away from the external world as we know it or say we know it” (Morgan 151-152).

“Because” and “praise” act as both connectors and dividers within the sequence. At times, the speaker seems to be revealing their intention, but that is quickly buried as the sonnet proceeds. In each sonnet there are always a few lines that initiate an opening out, an expansion – but this is never consummated. The third sonnet, which opens with the lines, “Because we seek confession it is transgressive / to name what lies between us” (73) shows this habit to particularly good effect. The sonnet does *not* name what lies between speaker and addressee; instead, the speaker twists through strange associations that give the impression of a difficult or incompatible relationship. Then the poem turns with, “Because the front door was always a semicolon.” This line articulates a hinge, or an incompleteness that is never rectified. The front door becomes an opening to an outside that is not mentioned, and, like the poetic sequence itself (and the semi-colon), it connotes both division and connection; the door opens to somewhere else but also opens to the place in which the speaker is, physically connecting the outside with the inside. Jay Prosser discusses this idea in *Second Skins*, where he argues that trans- people can at times merge their mental body<sup>19</sup> with the physical world, blurring the edges of their physicality (Prosser 75). In *Queer Phenomenology*, a work that engages with how non-normative bodies interact with the space around them, Sara Ahmed notes that, “spaces are not exterior to bodies; instead, spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body” (9). Here, Tolbert has moved beyond the body to consideration of the physicality of the space the body inhabits.

“Beg Approval” allows the reader to formulate multiple conclusions about the speaker’s identity and what it is they want to communicate; gender is also complicated throughout the sequence. The possibility of change, openness, and gender play is evident in the closing of the second sonnet:

Praise the eardrum, the human skull found in Roque d’Aille  
with the prosthetic seashell ear. Praise symmetry in all  
things binary. Praise the hermaphrodite.  
Praise butch-bottoms and femme-tops. Praise  
transistor radios. Praise scan and praise seek. (72)

Tolbert is, at first, probing body modification through prosthetic addition using the example of one of the oldest known experiments in prosthetics, that of a Neolithic woman<sup>20</sup>. S/he then moves on to

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<sup>19</sup> I define mental body to mean that which can mentally be felt and thought of as part of your own body. Prosser discusses projecting this mental body onto other materials such as prosthetics. I want to expand this idea beyond prosthetics to the surrounds of a person; in this poem the speaker adopts the door as part of their mental body.

<sup>20</sup> “No, it’s neither the black skull nor the jagged scar that runs like some virulent root about one side of the skull plate that so fascinates us today, but the ear, the artificial ear, that once locked into the left side of that hollow, black

gender-bending associations, confounding expectations of the traditional male-female binary, and finally moves deftly back to technology, although this time not primitive, as if to convey the sense that these ideas are being scanned through, like stations on a radio dial. While this section does not specifically mention a transition experience, sonnets four, five, and six contain lines which do – for example, “Praise hormone therapy,” (74) “Praise me, disappearing / like a good daughter. Praise me, your only son,” (75) and “Because gender is syntax, personified. Praise girl-boy / appetite” (76). Tolbert does not offer a single identity for the speaker: they are flexible and uphold fluidity. Interestingly, this fits with Keats’ concept of negative capability, which is directly mentioned in sonnets six and seven. Ou Li, whose dissertation defines negative capability, explains this concept:

At the centre, is a great poet’s capability of remaining “negative”, in the sense of being able to resist the instinctive clinging to certitude, resolution, and closure in the firm belief that great poetry is marked by its allowance for a full-scale human experience that is too copious and diverse to be reduced to a neatly unified system. To be negatively capable, is to be open to the actual vastness and complexity of experience, and one cannot possess this openness unless one can abandon the comfortable enclosure of doctrinaire knowledge, safely guarding the self’s identity, for a more truthful view of the world which is necessarily more disturbing or even agonizing for the self. (4)

The concepts of no fixed identity, and of there being no easy resolution within a text, are the only clearly defined ideas ascertainable from “Beg Approval.” As a vehicle given to viewing things from many angles and therefore emphasizing the problematic nature of closure, the sequence offers Tolbert an ideal means by which to expound a more truthful view of the world, and to contend, through “showing” rather than “telling,” that a life cannot be reduced to any singular point.

The fluidity of identity is even more apparent within “(ir)Retrieval.” This sequence is much more experimental and the crown form is only hinted at through seven sonnet-like segments. In “(ir)Retrieval,” Tolbert is working out the effect transition has on the speaker’s life (this poem has elements that are obviously autobiographical), and raising questions such as: how is a past or previous self incorporated into the present? What is lost and what is gained from transition? The opening line of the sequence directly addresses this, “That \_\_\_\_\_ was born Melissa Dawn Tolbert, December 24, 1974” (17). By using a blank space, reminiscent of an application form or a test, Tolbert subverts the traditional trans-

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receptacle. Carved from a seashell, the *spondylus Graederoptus*, its artisan had used the shell’s thick hinge to replicate the earlobe and its shallow vault to imitate the concavity of the ear’s outer whorl” (Sobin 52).

narrative of hiding the previous identity and minimizes the new identity, or what is to come, refusing to present the latter as the unproblematically or singularly “true” self.

“(ir)Retrieval” then is more about a becoming or a beginning, combined with a strong acknowledgment of the past. A line from the first sonnet both elucidates and complicates this beginning: “She is prologue. And simultaneous. She is domicile.” The “she” is both the previous state of being and the current; she cannot be fully left or fully changed. The title is an important aspect of this crown: unlike the almost demure asking for acceptance that “Beg Approval” articulates, “(ir)Retrieval” straddles recovery and the irrecoverable, embodying both a reaching back and an acknowledgment of what cannot be reached. Throughout the sequence these polarities are constantly wrestled in a prolonged manner due to the form. As poetic theorist Angela Leighton explains, “Form matters ... not because it withdraws altogether from ‘content’, but because it ‘tortures’ it” (22).

However, this poem is deliberately difficult. It refuses a simple conclusion and uses a litany of opaque and tantalizingly strange sentence constructions. For example, in the third sonnet, there is a moment in which Tolbert wrestles with the embodiment of memory, “That they memory / they memory they member. (non-consensual.) They member / they memory they rest. In this, they encourage / disparation” (19). Here, memory solidifies a kind of estrangement, both physically (these lines are about hands) and mentally. It is similar to what Jacob Edmond, in his book on contemporary poetry, says about Hejinian’s work, “the conception of poetic language as autonomous language that draws attention to words as such is combined with the view that poetic language is expected to ‘de-automatize and ‘make strange’ not only language but also the objects referred to” (74). Words are made new through a different kind of construction and an odd repetition. The patterning of the crown itself, its tendency to rework the same idea at length, contributes to producing this strangeness – but it is also something Tolbert seeks (and actively generates through his manipulation of language and syntax), for to write from a trans-experience is to write from a strangeness, perhaps even a kind of loss.

The short poem “Elegy” signals an expression of grief; as literary critics Michael O’Neill and Michael Hurley explain, “Elegy typically moves from the specific object of grief to the generalised applicability of grief and the compensations that may be found” (109). However, the shift that appears to take place in Tolbert’s poem is not from specific to general, but from a focus on the sentence’s subject

(the self) to a focus on its object (“her”): “I am so not myself (sometimes) I look at her. / And we are never equal to the break that we bring” (25). The poem pivots at the parenthetical “sometimes,” where the speaker moves from one grief-stricken position to the next: from an introspective disturbed emotional state to a focus on the subject of the poem, her. The use of parentheses in the first line helps mimic the fluctuating ungrounding that the speaker experiences; it creates a caesura within the line and fluidly relates “sometimes” to both clauses that the parentheses separate. An elegy is a lament for the dead or a lament for a dead thing; what is actually dead in this poem is ambiguous. Perhaps it is the “her” or perhaps this marks the death of a relationship.

Tolbert uses the title to pointedly situate the poem within the tradition of elegy, and the use of the couplet links it specifically to the Latin love elegy and the Greek epigram. Classics scholar Thea Thorsen defines the love elegy as, “[a] couplet [which] consists of a dactylic hexameter, followed by a dactylic pentameter” (4). It is a tradition that explores love for love’s sake; she describes it as love without cause. The love elegy is also characteristic of, “a mostly insurmountable gap between what the elegiac lover desires and what he experiences” (Thorsen 5). David Money explains that, “The elegiac couplet is by far the most popular form ... It was difficult to define an epigram precisely; you know one when you see it: a very short work, ideally making a quick, effective point” (Money 2). While Tolbert’s poem is quick and effective, it is also open-ended. Traditionally the love elegy has multiple couplets, around four, and so it is likely that Tolbert’s poem relies on both Latin and Greek influence (Thorsen 4). There is significant overlap in the two genres, according to both Money and Thorsen.

While Tolbert does not use dactyls, the first line is in trochaic hexameter. This allows for a slightly shorter syllabic line and a punchier rhythm that is deliberately stopped at the fourth foot by the parentheses. The pause in this line exemplifies the distance between the speaker’s need and the actuality that is expressed in the subsequent line; perhaps the parenthetical word could also be thought of as a bridge, a bridge for desire. The second line of the couplet is harder to scan as the meter is not as regular and has five stresses; it therefore loosely follows the tradition of the love elegy and the epigram. By starting the line with “And,” Tolbert is continuing a thought although the previous line ends with a full stop. The interaction between the punctuation and the first word of the next line emphasizes a lingering want within the poem, an undercurrent of desire – for the lost person or self. Desire and separation



oscillate and intertwine within the couplet; they are inextricably linked and compensatory resolution is not achieved.

“Elegy” enacts both a merging and a breaking, in a similar fashion to the image of the plastic between the cheese slices in “Beg Approval” (“Praise tablecloths; sway-back chairs; the plastic / folds that protect slice after slice of cheese” (71).). The final words emphasize the severance in the relationship, “the break that we bring.” This ending is unbalanced when compared to “never equal,” which is trochaic and generates a softer sound. By emphasizing the word “we,” Tolbert invokes madness, grief, and schism. While the couplet can clearly be read as the end of a relationship, it can also be read as a poem about the speaker’s transition. Tolbert finds it important to live as an out trans- person and continually questions what it means to be perceived as white and male; s/he says in an interview that, “Some parts of my corporeal text have been made invisible while other parts seem to have become more clear. And I have questions about that erasure” (Soto). While the couplet does not explicitly explore race, it intimates the dysphoric challenge that a trans- person experiences, not seeing the “self” in the mirror. One way of interpreting the strangeness of this poem might be through Ahmed’s concept of disorientation (also explored further in my chapter on Eli Clare). Ahmed states that, “disorientation is unevenly distributed: some bodies more than others have their involvement in the world called to crisis. This shows us how the world itself is more ‘involved’ in some bodies than in others, as it takes such bodies as the contours of ordinary experience” (159). Orientation is a means of relating one’s position in the world to socio-political structures and rules as they typically pertain to a “normative body”; as Ahmed argues, marginalized bodies exist on the periphery of normativity, and are therefore more often in a state of disorientation. The speaker in “Elegy” can be read as a body in a state of disorientation, particularly as Tolbert alludes to a mirror which instead of orienting the speaker enhances and even calls attention to their disorientation. Tolbert does not state that there is a mirror in this poem; however, if “look” is read at face value it can be seen to impute the presence of one which, rather than confirming, disrupts the contours of the speaker’s current bodily experience. Read this way, “sometimes” conveys tentativeness and uncertainty, allowing “her” to become the speaker’s own self – so the elegized subject is also the she. The act of transition can be similar to the death of a person: former names are referred to as

“deadnames”<sup>21</sup> and previous iterations of the self are sometimes more drastically erased from the new self’s life (Riedel).

Using the form of the love elegy to explore an experience that resists linguistic expression, Tolbert exploits the brevity of the form to allow the poem to expand beyond its structure. As Hejinian states, “The implication (correct) is that the words and the ideas (thoughts, perceptions, etc. – the materials) continue beyond the work. One has simply stopped because one has run out of units or minutes, and not because a conclusion has been reached nor ‘everything’ said” (Hejinian, “The Rejection of Closure”). Tolbert furthers this expansion through the use of abstract, almost mathematical language; the poem not only creates a sense of disillusionment but also generates questions. Who are these people? What are the circumstances outside of the poem? Is this a kind of equation? The limits imposed by the form heighten the drama of these two lines and open the text to a multitude of interpretations.

At times, Tolbert innovates self-forged formal constraints. This is the case with the poem, “Underneath February is a test strip. / And believe me. Believe me. I would.” This short sexain with a long title unfolds language in ways that are both intriguing and disorienting, similar to the spatial dislocation Ahmed posits in her theory of disorientation, which she defines as a socio-political theory in opposition to orientation – a binary opposition which explores how a body or identity relates or locates itself within the world through the framework set by social mechanisms such as government, institutions, cultural practice, national identities and familial definitions. Disorientation occurs when the points of location fail to represent the body in question in some way, which then ungrounds the body and renders it opaque (Ahmed 1, 157). In the introduction to his book on “Uncreative Writing,”<sup>22</sup> David Kaufmann explains the relationship between the author and the reader: “The more distant the author seems and the more inscrutable her desire becomes, the stronger our incentive is to figure out (in all senses) that author and that desire” (Kaufmann 6). This resonates with the reader’s experience of and reaction to “Underneath February.” From the title, a sense of urgency or earnestness is revealed as the speaker’s

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<sup>21</sup> “Hearing or seeing one’s old name can induce a visceral sense of terror that no matter how much progress one makes in their transition, the person they used to be (or pretended to be) is still there. Hence the term ‘deadname’: a name that shall not be spoken, for it invokes a restless spirit” (Riedel).

<sup>22</sup> “Uncreative Writing emphasizes what Richard Wollheim called the pre-executive function of the artist: her choices, rather than her skills. As a result ... the reader’s attention seems of necessity directed to the object matter of the poem and to the author’s relationship to that object matter. In fact, one could say that this relationship and the ethical problems that it presents form the subject matter of some of Uncreative Writing’s strongest works” (Kaufmann 6).

motivation. This is presumably connected to the “test strip”; however, the truncated sentences do not elucidate much connection. The title has a line break and this distorts the connection between the first complete thought and the superfluous punctuation that follows.

Tolbert opens with, “Men is another moment of happily” (57). The six lines of the poem proper are full of stressed syllables and this forces the poem on even as the syntax, at times, muddles the strength of the stressed beat. All effort to connect this fragmented thought to the title is confounded by the strangeness of the phrase “moment of happily.” The speaker is decidedly absent from this line, and where the title carried with it the vague possibility of pregnancy, we are left with an unfulfilled, empty statement. It almost has a robotically generated quality to it, as Bernstein says of conceptual poetry (while Tolbert is not a conceptualist this is an interesting way to think about the poem): “Queer-conceptualism, broadly construed, should be a clean mathematical process akin to algorithmically adding excess to structure; nothing should appear to be done by hand or by breath because the value here comes from the robot that seems like human” (Bernstein 39). The sense that the world of the poem is created by robotic or mathematical means is felt in the precision of the punctuation, almost the excess of punctuation, and in the oddly incomplete thoughts. Comparisons might be drawn between Tolbert’s praxis here (and elsewhere) and “écriture féminine,” defined by Hélène Cixous as a specifically female way of writing, “there is such a thing as *marked* writing ... writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural – hence, political, typically masculine – economy ... this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated” (879). Cixous responds to a binary economy that, in defining the feminine, “has grossly exaggerated all the signs of sexual opposition” (879). Writing that comes from a female-centered language and syntax, “is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (879). However, Tolbert is evolving a trans- rather than a feminist syntax (as suggested by the assertion in “Beg Approval,” that “gender is syntax personified”). The full poem reads:

Men is another moment of happily.  
 They say *your body*. My breasts  
 in my hands and. Your hands  
 cleaving. I said I would tether them.  
 Lay your hands down – I will  
 sever them like wood.

The break-down of articulation, or stammering effect, achieves a slowing down at times and at others provides a hammering of sound. The stress propulsion is most felt in the line, “Lay your hands down – I will,” in which the only pause is at the dash; it is a loud command to the addressee and is rendered forceful by the use of spondees. The punctuation before the final two words, “I will,” almost acts like a switch before the faucet is turned on such that the rest of the thought slips down to the next line.

Tolbert uses enjambment throughout to emphasize a sexual encounter and this may explain the prevalence of the thrummed periods: the poem perhaps mimics the starts and stops of intimate activity – the undressing, the readjusting, the intake of breath. The final statement, “I will / sever them like wood,” marks a change in direction: at the last, the poem becomes threatening or perhaps hints at BDSM (Bondage, Domination, Sadism, and Masochism). This line is much more sinister than the previous mention of “tether them,” which implies control but not harm. The sentence construction renders the direct object ambiguous: perhaps the act of severing is not meant for the hands but the “breasts.” This connection is established by following the logic of the thought and ignoring the period after “in my hands and.” This poem could be conceived of as expressing mourning for the loss or change of the speaker’s physical body and an unwillingness to let go of their previous identity. The title then becomes a taunt, “And believe me. Believe me. I would” (i.e. return to or acknowledge where “I” – the speaker – came from). The poem worries at the moment of physical transition: both desiring and resisting the surgical change, it oscillates on this dangerous edge. The ambiguity with which Tolbert has imbued the lines, making it unclear if the hands or the breasts are cut off and what is interfering with this process, what is tethered, emphasizes the speaker’s indecision.

Rather than seeking to convey the sense of an authentic, realistic “I,” Tolbert seems to pointedly have *the poem* create this speaker: “If lyric is the place where subjective feeling seems to rule supreme, it is also a place where subjectivity can seem to be composed and constructed, a place where the genre seems to shape the speaker rather than the speaker shaping the genre” (O’Neill and Hurley 55). The choice of form allows for slippery connections: because of the shortness of the poem (entirely decided by Tolbert) and the brevity of the lines, the speaker is rendered opaque, ornery and elusive. If the speaker is read as a queer subject, then perhaps in this little poem we can “see how queerness challenges the very subject of composition, of what it means to compose, of what it means to *be composed*” (Alexander and Rhodes 182).

While Tolbert does not use a form other than the open form that s/he creates in writing the poem, this poem is still bound by a set of rules, whether those rules be mechanical, excessive or reductive: it functions in the way that Hejinian describes, “The material aporia objectifies the poem in the context of ideas and of language itself” (Hejinian, “The Rejection of Closure”). The way that Tolbert uses syntactical structures, the manner in which the sentence is broken down, obscures the full meaning of the poem and the meaning behind the speaker’s declarations, and thus leaves the reader in a cloud of bewilderment. Ruth Padel describes a similar idea in relation to Selima Hill’s work (she means the comment to extend to women’s writing more generally), “Male readers ... prefer an orderly progression towards a poem’s disclosures – like, for instance, the associations created by a new image. With Hill’s poems they do not get this progression. Finding themselves dumped by her images in a world they never wanted to see, they ‘turn back at the border’” (Padel 40). While marking this as a practice grounded in traditional gender binaries is precisely what Tolbert is writing against, it is useful to consider that these images do not progress in an orderly fashion but are disjointed; they are queerly constructed.

In “The Palinode,” Tolbert unleashes a mist of repetition, where upon each repeated phrase more and more of the narrative context is revealed. The effect is that the reader is pulled out of the text and continually attempts to relate other contexts to the specific moment of the poem. As Jonathan Culler notes in *Theory of the Lyric*, “sound patterning gives lyric utterances authority that is neither justified nor justifiable – always open to question, yet a starting point to lure readers” (134). The palinode is defined as a recantation or a retraction, typically in reference to another poem; however, Tolbert subverts the concept of a reaction against a previous work as this poem does not refer back to any particular text – like “Underneath February,” it is almost without context (“palinode,” *The Concise Oxford Companion*). Prosser defines the palinode as, “not a defensive turn ... rather a recantation (palin-ode: literally a singing back or again); it is a counterbalancing of one’s primary ode in which what one could not see before, the real outside the text, one brings to light” (“A Palinode on Photography” 71). The reader, in Tolbert’s case, is missing the primary context and the poem hinges on this off-balance tilt.

“The Palinode” opens with a happy scene, but as more is revealed the initial buoyancy is undercut, “It is your birthday and you are a beautiful boy. We are beautiful boys / on a motorcycle. You wave to other bikers and other bikers wave to / the beautiful boys” (58). The superfluous “b” sounds

gush praise; the lines even bleed across the page in a prose style. The repetition has a similar quality to what John Taggart describes in an essay on poetics: “particles of a distinct vocabulary are fed into a space already defined by the poem’s original language. The new vocabulary is like a foreign language” (77). “Beautiful” almost becomes a refrain and eventually the stanza explodes in seemingly nonsensical sounds. The repeated word is rendered meaningless, as Miriam Gamble explains in a lecture on repetition: “repetition can put words under pressure in ways that strip us of our initial confidence in what they mean or stand for, and, thus, in the systems of understanding to which they act as columnar supports.” The generic descriptor “beautiful” loses its meaning and like negative capability opens the poem up to alternative possibilities. Again, Culler writes of the sonic quality of repetition, “poetry can resist the [reader’s] intelligence without being obscure: by offering linguistic echoing without obvious thematic purport ... Perhaps language must run the risk of dismissal as empty sound if it is to get under the guard of intelligence” (184). The speaker and the reader are enveloped in the beauty, but the beauty also has a darker tinge to it, an ironic tone: “Beautiful boys, your birthday is over. / Your gloved hand, beautiful boy. Beautiful boy, your gloved hand. How / beautiful. Beautiful. I’m cold.” The warmth that Tolbert creates with the language he has churned continuously throughout the first stanza abruptly stops, and, as Taggart posits, the new vocabulary (“I’m cold”) feels foreign.

The second stanza explicitly reveals the relationship between the speaker and the addressee. Tolbert again uses repeated phrases and sounds to emphasize the cyclical nature of this relationship and possibly even the danger:

Part of it is that we are at a gun show.  
Part of it is that we are at a gun show  
but we have not come together. The danger  
of not coming together. Put the gun down, dear  
and take the bullets out sweetly. Push them  
one by one. Marry them  
to the muscle that sits between our bones.

Each new sentence reveals more about the reality of the poem’s situation; the lines unfold new information which allows for a shifting of focus or perspective and a play with storytelling. This

technique, like an origami of memory or a dream, uses a kind of *exergasia*<sup>23</sup>, a repetition that both amplifies and disquiets (Burton).

Sylvia Tomasch concludes, when writing about the process of editing as a type of palinode, that, “Editing as palinode is a process of unending revision, of partial recovery of an illusory presence. But because repair is temporary and desire arises anew, even a palinode never speaks the final word. It too will need to be re-sung, yet again” (476). This second stanza revises the relationship that is laid out in the first; instead of being grounded by a motorcycle, this one is centered on a gun – what was originally joyous and freeing is now something of danger and violence. Here the poem signals that it is hyper masculine: the motorcycle, the gun, the eventual leather. But this too is complicated through the emotional desire of the speaker. The latter half of this stanza comprises a strange command, “Marry them [the bullets] / to the muscle that sits between our bones.” This intimate exercise comes as a moment of paradox as the speaker implores the addressee to render this mechanism of death into a useless piece of metal, but also to fire the ammunition – a marriage through pain and destruction. The diction is slow and deliberate but also obfuscated by the strange imagery of combining the bullets with the muscle membrane – almost as if this is the act of loading the self, a contradictory idea compared to the violence of firing a gun.

The poem then returns to the prose-like style in the next stanza; it spreads across the page offering no lined containment. As Maurice Kilwein Guevara says, “[when] the line break is not available as an organizational unit ... poems are constructed as complex electrical circuits with breakers and relays that create multiple patterns of energy and surprise in the gaps between the sentences and the paragraphs” (Ashley 167). In a declaration against a revisionist history, the speaker declares, “Let’s just say I remember everything.” The poem goes on to extol an intimate moment of their first physical encounter; it is stuck in an interior world of reminiscence. This is typical of the palinode, as Prosser explains, “As a mode that returns in the attempt to get back what has passed, the palinode is intrinsically caught up with grief, loss, and retrospect” (“A Palinode on Photography” 77).

Tolbert then shifts focus in the final lines of this stanza:

(New ending: I am the red-winged monster curled inside you like a fist.

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<sup>23</sup> “Repetition of the same idea, changing either its words, its delivery, or the general treatment it is given. A method for amplification, variation, and explanation” (Burton).

It is not so much the darkness that concerns me. It is the loose thing, the clambering thing I  
imagine inhabits your chest.) (59)

By presenting this as “new,” Tolbert points towards an editorial process; the poem is a dynamic and changing place even as this is recorded on the page and appears permanent. This stanza is parenthetical, an aside, almost like a whispered or self-conscious ending. It does not even end the poem, which again indicates process rather than finished product. The speaker imagines themselves as an intimate part of their lover; they are contained within, and even possibly embody, the whole of the heart. Taggart poses a question that is interesting to consider in relation to these lines, “How is the poem to be the voice’s enactment of language, one interior calling out to another?” (76) The speaker’s own voice is wrapped terribly into the lover’s action and even this new ending does not separate them but instead entwines them even more closely. Likewise, as “Underneath February” highlights the constructed nature of the self, the approach to the narrative in “The Palinode” echoes Stephanie Burt’s<sup>24</sup> point about form, poetic and otherwise, as an imposed rather than discovered thing:

the contemporary sonnet may well show how much of any pattern, any form (and not only in poetry) is not what we discover, but what we create, or impose. Poets who start where modernism ends ... are ... especially likely to illustrate the opacity of experience and to highlight the artificiality and autonomy of linguistic artistic structure.’ (Burt 260)

“The Palinode” proposes that memory is an act of creative construction, not a faithful record of “what happened.”

Another form of editing is used in the next stanza, which is double spaced giving the impression of deletion or omission. The stilted factual language suggests missing links, “As of October 21, 2006 I will officially be becoming a new kind of man.” While Tolbert offers clarity and reality in this stanza, the potential deletion or at least contextual obscurity provides a point of tension. Tomasch offers an interesting insight into the meaning of editing within this context: it, “can be understood as the textualization of the act of mourning” (459). The form of editing, pseudo-deletions, can be read as a way to carry the former self with the speaker. While this kind of mourning is personal rather than community-focused, it nonetheless helps, as Muñoz argues about melancholia, to “(re)construct identity,” creates a “structure of feeling”<sup>25</sup> and performs an act of resistance against the obliteration of the trans- identity.

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<sup>24</sup> Formerly Stephen Burt, now goes by Stephanie (“Stephanie Burt”).

<sup>25</sup> I am aware that using this analysis applies a concept explained for black bodies to a non-black body. I wish to tie these readings through a minority status and the type of activism that Muñoz argues for.



The stanza as a whole is about both the boring minutiae of the beginning of transition and the destruction of the relationship that this has caused, “You won’t forgive me for taking me away from you.” This line comes as a contradiction to the “new ending”: the speaker and addressee are not bound together but separating/separated. The hints of danger that accompany the second stanza drift into this one as the dangers of transphobia filter through the lover’s inability to forgive. The final line of this stanza ends with a colon, “I’ve woken / up close to the ugliest thing I’ve ever known:” – almost as if the poem is opening up to a pit of despair. The final stanza is on the following page and there is ample space to nearly suggest that the poem actually ends on the line previously quoted. However, it carries on beyond this point, switching from the more open syntax of the penultimate stanza to the short, choppy sentences characteristic of Tolbert’s writing, “I love you. You. No longer. So I’m told” (60). The poem ends on the speaker’s understanding of the relationship and the finality of what has transpired; the speaker however is not fully convinced of this.

Throughout “The Palinode,” Tolbert troubles the speaker’s reliability by presenting repetitious lines that unfurl a slightly different meaning sequentially. Hejinian posits that, “The coercive, epiphanic mode in some contemporary lyric poetry can serve as a negative model, with its smug pretension to universality and its tendency to cast the poet as guardian to Truth” (Hejinian, “The Rejection of Closure”). Hejinian argues that by writing from a perspective of universal truth the contemporary lyric can become arrogantly knowing, but Tolbert continually confuses truth, leaving the reader in a state of narrative opacity. This type of opacity is similar to Glissant’s definition which, “exposes the limits of schemas of visibility, representation, and identity” (Blas 149.) For Glissant, “The opaque is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It [opacity] is that which cannot be reduced; which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence” (Glissant 191). The poem is reluctant; it does not want to be defined; it does not want a gender, but appears to have one; it does not want to break, but it does; it does not want to be clear. The sectioning makes for a disjointed reading experience, generating lacunae and requiring work from the reader to connect the parts; instead of the poet holding “truth,” the reader must discover it. Again, the association of the poem with the genre of the palinode foregrounds this dismissal of epiphanic “truth,” as the palinode is an expansion and rebuttal of the primary ode’s “discovery.”

To return to the bridge metaphor that shadows Tolbert's collection: a bridge connects, spans or builds something new to bring together two separated entities. Working with and reworking traditional forms and modes, these poems themselves form bridges which seek to embody a language and form that effectively represents a queer context. This poet's use of strange and at times jarring syntax chimes with Edmond's summary of Hejinian's theory of poetic estrangement, "as a way to affirm personhood, sociality, and community without essentializing identity" (Edmond 79). While Tolbert does try to write a speaker who is out and toying with gender, estrangement echoes throughout the poems; he works towards authenticity by actively resisting a simplified identity. This poetic estrangement points to the artifice of gender, the complexity of identity and the means by which form can both foreground and facilitate process (as against promoting "fixity"). The formal structures highlight a processing or a turning over, particularly in the case of the sonnet crowns, which inevitably discourages conclusion. The very range of the strategies that Tolbert uses to present the complexity of a transgender speaker encourages a definable point that is more than a singularity. To cite Hejinian again, the sincerity of a difficult text lies in "the ethical principle by which a poet tests words against the actuality of the world" (Hejinian, "Barbarism" 331). This is an ethics Tolbert pursues; as he tests the trans- subject against the reality of the world, it continually resists definition and consolidation.

## River, Rock, Skin: Re(-)presentations of the Body in Eli Clare's *The Marrow's Telling*

*Our deepest stories depend upon so much...the very marrow itself...They form bedrock; they shift over time; they pull across grain.*

*Eli Clare, from "Interlude 1: Tug"*

Eli Clare<sup>26</sup> is a genderqueer disabled poet writing through the lens of the non-abled queer body. In his collection *The Marrow's Telling: Words in Motion*, he explores how the trans-, disabled and queer body is in continual metamorphosis, expanding and renewing metaphorical representations of the body<sup>27</sup> in innovative and surprising ways. Using different ways of theorizing the body, such as cyborg theory, disability studies, and rhizome theory (all of which will be defined later in this chapter), I trace a range of conceptual multiplicities and accretions that reveal different representations of the body in Clare's work.

There are several models of disability: "In the social model, disability is a category that is extrinsic to specific bodily being ... In the medical model, disability is intrinsic: this body is disabled, faulty, in need of being (and potentially able to be) cured, managed, rehabilitated" (Kuppers, "Toward a Rhizomatic" 225). Petra Kuppers elucidates the body as the specific site of the category disability; she uses rhizome theory<sup>28</sup> to situate disability within a non-hierarchical model. Deleuze and Guattari, creators of the theory, define rhizomatic thought through the metaphor of fauna, as a means of cumulatively interlinking ideas and categories, "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be" (7). Multiplicity through linear connection is inherent to this model, as Deleuze and Guattari outline, "The multiple *must be made*, not by always adding a higher dimension, but rather in the simplest of ways, by dint of sobriety, with the number of dimensions one already has available" (6). Essentially, binaries do not exist within rhizome theory because other connections can always be made. To understand the rhizome in relation to disability as Kuppers is using it: each aspect of disability is connected to another; in

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<sup>26</sup> I will be using the pronouns he and him for Clare, as these are his preferred pronouns, however, this should not erase his identification as genderqueer.

<sup>27</sup> I will use "body" in place of person or people throughout this chapter because Clare is working out a way of representing and expressing physical bodies which are often erased. When I use body, it will often also mean the consciousness of the person.

<sup>28</sup> Deleuze and Guattari theorize against an arboreal model, one that includes hierarchies with a single root system and branches that delimit creative modes of connection (Deleuze et al. 15). Instead, "The rhizome is altogether different, a map and not a tracing ... The map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious. It fosters connections between fields ... The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification ... Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways" (Deleuze et al. 12).

her explanation of intrinsic and extrinsic these ideas about disability are held in tension with one another. In line with these ideas, Clare exposes a range of different ways in which the disabled body can be represented and challenges these representations by searching for alternatives. In his work, the body is often conceptualized as multiple, as several interwoven identities, or as Glissant puts it, interweaving opacities.

As Donna Haraway states, “the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position ... promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions, i.e., of views from somewhere” (quoted in McRuer 60). Further, through this conjoining impetus the disabled/trans-/queer body is, in Clare’s writing, radically intertwined with non-human nature. His poems repeatedly employ metaphors of the natural world to reclaim the body and find a new naturalness in bodies that might be considered otherwise, in addition exploring the limits these bodies can reach. Clare is continually trying to orient and reorient the queer, disabled, trans- body through his poems and essays. Sara Ahmed writes that, “orientation is a matter of how we reside in space ... sexual orientation [gender presentation] might also be a matter of residence; of how we inhabit spaces as well as ‘who’ or ‘what’ we inhabit spaces with” (1). Clare is seeking out ways to expand, increase, orient and situate the body. This essay will explore the ways in which Clare complicates identity and experience in his poetry; through close examination of several poems, I will unpick both the intricacies of viewpoint and the natural imagery within them, and demonstrate the various ways in which techniques relate to, illuminate, and expand the potential of, the body.

In “Thin Silver Notes,” the collection’s opening poem, Clare presents a highly metaphorical and conceptual body. Through a call-and-response approach, he pairs each of four bodies or characters with both a corporeally-connected action and an abstract question; each of these pairings angles towards a reality or truth. This poem operates on at least two different levels: first, and most obviously, as the description of a riot (footnoted as the 1992 Los Angeles riots); in this reading, the shifting perspectives suggest the many people involved. And second, as the presentation of fragmented identities within (partial views of) a single speaker. The *dramatis personae* include “The drowning one who hauls / his own heavy self back to land” and “The one who carries a rifle, swings a crowbar, / walks through shards as her neighborhood burns”; the final persona is “The one who comes close / to thin silver notes of death”

(*The Marrow's Telling* 11). The poem strikes chords with Elizabeth A. Wheeler's explanation of disability writing, in which she outlines the purpose of fracturing the single consciousness:

A consciousness grounded in a certain type of body, and that body grounded in a certain type of landscape, provides a vivid example of situated knowledge. The more specific we get about situated knowledge, though, the more we encounter the problem: Whose body will be exemplary ... One solution is the turn to writing that is dialogic in and of itself: writing that contains a multiple consciousness. (554)

Wheeler's concept is not dissimilar to Walt Whitman's assertion in "Song of Myself," "I am large, I contain multitudes" (76). However, rather than presenting a big and omnipresent speaker, Clare approaches a multiple consciousness through a current queer and trans- lens. There is nothing to specifically name the different characters within "Thin Silver Notes" as disabled, but that is perhaps the point – that the body does not have to be specifically marked, that the absence of indicators to the contrary does not necessarily impute that a body is abled. The landscape that the speakers are presented in is likewise unspecific; there is little to ground the poem in a place, even with the footnote. By deliberately creating a vaguely delineated world, Clare draws attention to the universality or the applicability of this poem to any body in any time and place.

The opening of the poem links the word with the body, "The one who wears language / warm against her breastbone." Here, language becomes a comforting shield; Clare uses the vehicle of metaphorical warmth to express the pleasure that communication through it brings, and perhaps also the desire to nurture it (like an infant held close). This metaphor highlights the inherent value of language; it is precious and bodily important. With this image, then, Clare links language to a positive experience; however, the mood alters with the switch into the response stanza (fuller quote given to show visual format):

The one who wears language  
warm against her breastbone:

Which dreams are memory,  
rhythm of leg and lung  
and heart mile after mile?

The colon, which would typically signal expansion, actually effectuates abrupt change in this poem, creating tension. There is a conflict between the potentially expansive metaphorical logic of language – its growth and comfort – and the murkiness of memory (what the language works to describe, and which

presents itself as questionable or untrustworthy). Language and memory – and the two stanzas of the poem – are thus connected through the colon, but jarringly, not harmoniously, so. Likewise, the character's status as the senior figure in the relationship (the infant's protector) is challenged by the evasive quality of what the poem hopes can be expressed or shared through language.

Each character in the poem performs an action in counterpoint to the questions; and, as shown above, rather than cohering, the pairings tend to jolt in a disorienting way. Ahmed's basic explanation of disorientation is a helpful tool to apply to this poem, "If orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space, then disorientation occurs when that extension fails" (11). Orientation fails to occur in "Thin Silver Notes" as there is little to connect the characters to the space in which their actions play out. Perhaps the purpose of disorientation within the poem is to question how these various bodies would be oriented within a normative frame, as queerness is associated with disorientation (Ahmed 171-172). Further, without markers or signs which enable *the reader* to self-orient within the space of the poem, Clare suggests that these bodies may not be as they seem: they may expand beyond the limits of our (the readers') assumptions.

Another means by which Clare effects disorientation in "Thin Silver Notes" is through the physical layout of the poem on the page. Padel explains that "what defines a form visually are hollows, shadows, gaps and spaces ... White space is silence made visual: unseen and unsaid belong together ... Breath is caught and held across white spaces" (24-25). The space between the linked stanzas (seen in the above-quoted stanzas) creates a pause and a sense of disconnection between them. Likewise, moving from one set of paired stanzas to the next, the eye has to travel left across the page:

Which poems are flesh and which  
are dream: did we dance the day  
Nelson Mandela went free?

The one who carries a rifle, swings a crowbar,  
walks through shards as her neighborhood burns

There is a celebratory tone to the stanza that includes Nelson Mandela, but that emotion does not travel over the stanza break. Instead, destruction and danger jar and fracture not only the content of the stanzas but also, with the exception of the first, the characters (the others being "the one who carries a rifle,"

“the drowning one” and the figure threatened by “thin silver notes of death”). This holds for each shift between sets of paired stanzas.

Shifting back to a disabled trans- reading of this poem, cyborg theory offers another way of exploring the collective identities Clare depicts in “Thin Silver Notes.” In “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway theorizes that we are all cyborgs. She states that “The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation” (150). Her theory is a means of explaining human identity in a non-hierarchical way, as opposed to identity-politics-based theories. Ollivier Dyens expands upon Haraway’s theory, seeing the cyborg as a liminal and transitional creation, “The cyborg is not a body, but rather bodies in becoming (each with several owners and originating from several territories)” (81). The multiple characters in “Thin Silver Notes” can be understood as representations of the kind of cyborg Dyens outlines. These different identities are in motion, in a process of becoming, and are grappling with their own existence in the world. The ending of the poem signals a different kind of transformation or becoming, “Which poems refuse to lie and which / lies tell a truth: fierce and rough, whatever / the terror, shake this into memory.” In other words, bring these experiences into the body and allow the body to be changed by them. The poem culminates in sentiments which can be understood as similar to what Dyens says of memory: “Memories are our existence, and art is their system of replication” (37).

Siegfried J. Schmidt theorizes that, “Memory conceived of as a function of the brain which is distributed over the whole neuronal system organizes itself on the basis of its own history; consequently it is plausible to say that it does not represent but rather constructs reality” (192). Art further “composes” the material on which it works, and, in “Photographs,” the next poem I will discuss, Clare builds an increasingly constructed/replicated ekphrastic sequence, each section of which focuses on a different snap shot in and by which the disabled body is framed.

Clare meditates on both the disabled body and representations of it by examining (and implicitly interrogating) different layers – the social appearance, a desired reality, the normative frame and that same reality interrupted by societal torments. Section I merges two photographs of disabled women by Abraham Menashe, section II depicts sexual intimacy between two disabled bodies, section III observes the photographer (ostensibly Menashe) and section IV revisits the bodies making love but incorporates

taunts. In the first section, the opening veils the fact that the speaker is focused on two photographs depicting two different women. Initially, a single woman is described, “Fingers splayed and reaching, / odd angle of wrist and grin,” but then, abruptly, in the middle of what seems straightforward and accumulative description, Clare writes, “facing pages, two women” (*The Marrow’s Telling* 96). This discontinuity jars the reader into remembering that this is someone else’s (Menashe’s) frame of these two women, a frame that accentuates the non-normative qualities of their bodies: “odd angle of wrist and grin” and “the feet / she doesn’t have.” Clare emphasizes the speaker’s perception of these photographs by using words like “odd,” “tilt,” “splayed” and “retreating.” Attention is further drawn to the act of framing by the formal layout of the next stanza, which is broken up like bits of a jigsaw puzzle:

soft and loose against  
her stumps.  
                                    The other rolls  
her head away from the camera

Here, the stanza break almost functions in the same way enjambment would, where “the concept of enjambment tends to result in a focus on an obstacle that has to be carefully straddled” (Dewey 201). The obstacle in need of careful straddling here is the photographer and, by extension, the lens they point, the angle from which they point it, and the resulting emphasis of the representation produced.

Writing about screens (the screen can be seen as a barrier), Alice Fulton argues that, “The space of between [the screen and the subject], where meaning is neither completely revealed nor completely concealed, is the space of possibility” (15). The screen, as Fulton describes it, is a means of creating distance between the observer and the subject. This distance might automatically be seen as negative, but can also, as she suggests, have positive aspects: “the space of possibility.” Clare foregrounds negative screens in the poem (as readers, our access to the subjects is doubly interrupted: by the photographer and the poem’s speaker) by continually acknowledging that these stills are posed, “She / holds hands with someone beyond / the frame.” Fulton further states that, “Gatekeepers, judgmental structure, screens are invested with the power of entry and exclusion” (23). Acknowledging the frame and act of construction, the poem searches for the limits and edges of those frames; by resting different representations alongside one another it works to foster a greater space of possibility. Whereas the screens of photographer and



speaker fit the negative model, Clare himself, as the artist behind the exposing arrangement of the poem, can be seen to afford a positive alternative.

The layers of construction result in juxtapositions: in direct contrast with the placid, smiling, almost child-like bodies mentioned before, the second section of “Photographs” is delivered in lines which take on a start-stop motion due to internal spacing, a kind of “geographical dispersion” (Share) which is a textural reminder of the space created through the screen(s) and also recalls Padel’s idea of the unseen and seen working in visual partnership. However, here the space is created by the bodies themselves: the space is that of their physical coming together, as mimicked by the distribution of the words on the page. These lines depict a sensual sexual act between two bodies, likely two disabled bodies. Here the sequence focuses on the disabled body in a different way: not as an exoticized object, but simply as a being. Wheeler synthesizes views of the disabled body (including Clare’s):

The normal body is defined as an able-body conforming to Western standards of beauty, fitness, strength, independence and intelligence. Clare describes the marginalization of disabled bodies as acts of thievery. The bodies of marginalized individuals are stolen through assumptions, biases, prejudice, media representations, film, and so on. (89)

Sections II and IV of “Photographs” attempt to reclaim the disabled body, and to assert and render it visible in a different way. These sections build upon each other, repeating a scene; but section IV expands to include epithets and intrusions that social exposure brings for these two bodies. As shown below, the two sections begin with entanglement:

## II.

body against body  
 we tumble roll rise  
 arrive again tongue to tooth hand  
 balancing small of back  
 sweet sweet skin shining sweat  
 we think coil and release but soon  
 it will be a thoughtless rhythm breath  
 to muscle to ragged breath (96)

## IV.

bodies tumble roll  
 rise *crazy clumsy* arriving  
 again body against  
 body *awkward*  
*ugly* each inviting  
 the next tongue to tooth sweet

sweet skin *twisted*  
*deformed* a thoughtless  
 rhythm *freak monster* breath to muscle  
 to ragged breath grace lives  
 tangled and strong (97)

The italicized words (“crazy,” “awkward,” “ugly” ...) are insults that map onto the bodies; the incorporation of the italics into the section gives the impression of memories that are bound up with the identities of the bodies in motion, just as the exploration of collective trauma is mapped onto the body and expressed through love making in Driskill’s “Map of the Americas” (discussed on pages 101-105). However, Clare is representing a more personal trauma. Katerina Tsiokou explains that the disabled body absorbs external influences, “emphasis needs to be placed on the manipulation of the body as a site for the imposition of essentializing and normalizing forces, which transcend the context of biology and aim at social, political and cultural discrimination of the oppressed subjects” (207). Section II of “Photographs” sets up an intimate encounter without the interjection of external forces; in contrast, the final section contextualizes the disabled body’s lived experience as an oppressed subject who, even at their most intimate moments, is inundated by past moments of trauma. Together, these two sections show that, seen from the perspective of a non-able-bodied person themselves (as against that of an able-bodied onlooker), non-able-bodied experience is not “other” to that of able-bodied people: in section II, the emphasis is simply on a sexual experience. It is only when externalized comments (the italics of section IV) are layered on to the experience that it is defined as different.

Prosser writes that, “Photographs don’t record reality: they change the very nature of reality – by representing it” (“A Palinode on Photography” 76). Clare exposes the inbuilt prejudices within normative representation in “Photographs” by shifting perspective and modulating the quality of his lineation, which develops from a more traditional and stilted structure (almost a replication of a static frame) to fluid, wave-like lines that convey motion. The contrast highlights the constructed frame against a kinetic human experience, creating a varied expression of the disabled body’s representation.

In other poems which also dwell on representation, Clare switches tack to focus on the trans-body and test out means by which that body might be metaphorically connected to the natural world. In “Whale Bone and Ash,” the presumably trans-/queer body is implicitly compared to dying sperm whales – this alien comparison can be read as a projection of the speaker’s anxiety about their body. As in “Thin

Silver Notes,” the single body of the speaker is mapped onto multiple analogues (in this case forty-one sperm whales), suggesting that multiple consciousnesses make up one identity. Here, though, the transference is not as clearly defined. Oliver Bendorf writes of transgender studies in regard to nature:

Nature matters for transgender studies because of how we [trans- people] map (and are mapped) along boundaries of inside and out, natural and unnatural ... Transgender studies can shepherd us beyond ‘tired gendered portrayals of earth-mother-goddess nature’ and toward re-genderings of natural space. (136)

As the speaker begins puberty, an extreme moment of change and alienation<sup>29</sup> for the trans- self, their encounter with the whales poignantly shapes their experience and helps them to feel grounded again. The opening lines thrust the reader into an unusual and disorienting scene: “Forty-one sperm whales, long / as logging trucks, beached / themselves on South Jetty when/ I was fourteen” (23). Both the whales and the speaker are on the cusp of change: death for the former and puberty for the latter.

The first three stanzas chronicle the whales’ demise and the hungry crowd’s desire for what is, to them, a spectacle. Clare shows a third-party view of this destructive perspective on the out-of-place and alien bodies of the whales, contrasting the speaker with the crowd. Tension from the crowd is felt through the enjambment; Rebecca Hazelton explains that enjambment can withhold information and “produces a subtle kind of mystery or anxiety” whereas “An end-stopped line offers completion and, potentially, reassurance.” This anxiety is at its most pronounced in “Whale Bone and Ash” when enjambling lines culminate in verbs, creating prospective enjambment (that which builds over the line) and propelling the reader onto the next line (Koops van ‘t Jagt et al. 4). For example, “pictures, pried teeth from bone, carved,” where the verb “carved” hangs at the end of this visceral line, pushing over into the shocking revelation of the next: “carved / initials and swastikas into living flesh.” Clare builds the tension in the first line, questioning what will be “carved,” and then releases this anxiety by ending the next line in a full stop – although the punctuation does not decrease the shock impact of the “living flesh” and the possessive and supremacist symbols. The crowd does not have “a sense of the land as a sacred domain

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<sup>29</sup> Prosser argues that through puberty the transgender subject experiences their body becoming more alien and strange, less a part of the self, as they stop relating to what they are becoming (*Second Skins* 61-85). Raymond Thompson, in his memoir of transition, expresses an urge to rip his own skin off as his body developed, bringing anxiety, frustration and near physical destruction (Prosser, *Second Skins* 71). Also, this distinction and declaration of alienation comes from a constructed and protected notion of childhood. Gabrielle Owen explains this as follows, “Trans embodiment disrupts and denaturalizes the developmental narrative of adolescence, revealing it for what it is – sometimes a story we have been told and sometimes a story of our own making. And yet adolescence persists as the ideological container for the trans phenomena that permeate all human experience” (23).

and repository of memory and myth” (Parini 153), but instead views it as a space of plenty for all kinds of consumption – both sustenance and beauty. This is in stark contrast to the speaker’s desire to care for the whales. For them, seeing the beached whales is a traumatic and intimate experience which impacts how they understand their own body, an implied alien body that also feels at home in water (the speaker later desires “wading knee-deep in the river”). The experience is transposed onto the speaker’s own body by dint of this felt connection.

Clear identification between the speaker and whales is explicitly articulated in the lines, “I wanted to caress / their obsidian sides, pour handfuls of salt water over them, / lay my body down on the sand.” The comfort and care the speaker expresses stems from a desire for dignity for the whales but also from the parallel understanding of – empathy with – their trapped bodies. The speaker states that this is “Not the death of animals / sheltered deep inside a briar patch, / but public.” However, the speaker does not interpret their own presence as impinging on the whales’ privacy. This is not unlike the idea of the “self-conscious Anthropocene<sup>30</sup>,” which signals comprehension of the impact of human activity on nature; and yet the connection Clare seeks to establish here is likely less about environmental factors and more related to Bendorf’s previously mentioned assertion (on page 139) regarding the trans- lens’s ability to fruitfully explore the liminality of the boundary between human-made and non-human made worlds. Therefore, the speaker’s identification with the whales exists in layers. John Felstiner quotes Gary Snyder on nature poetry, “‘To write poetry of nature,’ Snyder says, ‘to articulate the vision,’ means a conflict between one thing and the other” (346). Felstiner expands on this conflict, defining it as the clash of, “Egocentric versus ecocentric: nature poetry lives by this tension” (Felstiner 6). Clare works toward an ecocentric agenda in which the human world is part of a natural system, grounded in and connected with the animal and earthy. Here, the speaker explores the connection tacitly; the link is more strongly and openly made in poems such as “And Yet” and “In the Woodshop.”

For a single stanza, “Whale Bone and Ash” shifts to focus on the speaker recounting their first menstruation, their mother’s excitement at this milestone and their need for a private release. This midpoint of the poem again draws a comparison between the whales and the speaker’s body, linking

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<sup>30</sup> A term coined by Lynn Keller to identify, “the period since the term Anthropocene was introduced when, whether or not people use that word, there is extensive ‘recognition that human actions are driving far-reaching changes to the life-supporting infrastructure of Earth’” (1).

them through water-invoking words: “First blood stained my thighs, / floated and sank in clots.” While the analogy is extreme, this marker of female bodied adulthood is often the point of trauma for the trans- (or yet to identify as such) person; there is confirmation of a self that has previously been avoided, and frustration, anxiety or loss ensues (Prosser, *Second Skins* 71). The loss is gently threaded through the image of the speaker longing to “lay my body down on the sand” next to the whales. Later, the sand is wiped clean of the whales’ hacked up and burnt bodies; the ocean even clears the “pink / ribbons [that] decorated the sand” (again connecting whales and speaker through blood). The speaker’s body longs to be closer to the natural world, to shed an egocentric view for an ecocentric one: “My mother / celebrated, but I wanted the privacy / of climbing trees.”

The poem follows the story of the whales’ beaching, their death, and the subsequent clean-up, with intense attention on their physical bodies. In addition to the pubescent trans- body, Clare moots an implicit comparison with the disabled body, which is likewise often considered alien or other. The disabled body too, then, is connected to a strange and perhaps vital naturalness through the whale metaphor. Kupperts’ writes<sup>31</sup>, “I am intrigued by the potential of those of us whose identities are pressured to reach toward the metaphors of the natural world, to go with the stream, and who complicate nature/culture boundaries at these edges” (“Trans-ing Disability Poetry at the Confluence” 606). By making an analogy so jarring as that between the self and the whales, Clare pressurizes such boundaries, and brings into question concepts of difference and the “natural” or normative.

“And Yet” likewise seeks a means of inviting the natural world into the body and the daily process of transition, this time much more explicitly. Clare traces several threads of identity for a single speaker who is in the early stages of transition, mingling the pragmatics of transition with the speaker’s everyday life as a disabled/queer person; and, through self-directed commands to bring non-human-directed or “wild” nature into the body, he works towards an imagined balance with it. The poem opens directly, “I lay out syringe, alcohol pad, vial: a ritual / connecting me to junkies. Draw the testosterone” (91). The ritual carries through the whole poem, connecting medical and natural imagery, which are typically in opposition and which Clare works to link through metaphor. “And Yet” uncovers disparate connotations to the reshaping of the self through transition – such as the word “junkies” in the quoted

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<sup>31</sup> Kupperts’ essay analyzes Clare’s poem “And Yet,” although this quote is not in direct reference to that poem.

lines above. In contrast with these more negative and disturbing analogies, the speaker summons a grounding to the earth through lines like, “Open the windows, forsythia spills its dense yellow.”

In *Brilliant Imperfection*, Clare explains how he began to reframe medical transition in his mind:

When I started taking testosterone, I was impatient for facial hair and a deeper voice, slimmer hips and a squarer jaw. But underneath those defined body-mind<sup>32</sup> changes, I hungered for a settledness that *girl* and *woman* had never given me. I caught myself thinking of that pale yellow synthetic hormone as honey and light, the smell of sugar pine, infusing me. Through metaphor, I was trying to wrench my transformation away from the medical-industrial complex. (179)

Clare uses metaphor like, “a natural scripture, one that calls us back to the ground itself, with all the physical and metaphorical resonances contained in that phrase” (Parini 34). Each time the poem introduces something “synthetic” derived from the medical-industrial complex, it is immersed in “natural”<sup>33</sup> imagery, as, for example, here: “Cypionate<sup>34</sup> suspended in cottonseed oil, / a shapeshifter’s drug the color of pale sunlight.” Padel describes the kinetic force metaphors can generate: “metaphor is energy and movement. Movement out and also movement between...metaphor’s energy is the energy of relationship. Metaphor enriches by moving between home and foreign, self and other” (14-15). Parini’s description of metaphor’s properties ties in with rhizomatic methods of connection. Each time the poem returns to the earth and invites nature into the process of transition, the speaker’s self is enriched and energized. Whereas, when the medical-industrial complex is mentioned, the poem stalls – “In the mirror I wait ... But today I have Pfizer, Upjohn, Watson, / doctors saying yes, saying no” (92).

Kuppers argues that this poem is about the speaker’s journey; she says that, “Clare’s wildness here is the roil of a changing body, hormones coursing, transformation spanning from blood into language, eschewing certainty for the danger (and pleasure) of the ride” (“Trans-ing Disability Poetry at the Confluence” 612). A useful way to contextualize the many threads of transition within the poem is via the concept of “desiring-machines” outlined in rhizome theory. Tsiokou defines the desiring-machine as “an externally directed, productive force that creates and recreates reciprocal links between the subject

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<sup>32</sup> Clare uses the term “body-mind” to describe personhood, stating that, “I followed the lead of many communities and spiritual traditions that recognize body and mind not as two entities but as one” (*Brilliant Imperfection* xvi).

<sup>33</sup> I use “natural” in quotes here to reference the anti-trans- feminist argument that transition is bodily mutilation and unnecessary; Susan Stryker, a trans- historian, summarizes that these feminists believe trans- people are “so alienated from their bodies that they think little of mutilating them” (111).

<sup>34</sup> The complete name is testosterone cypionate, which makes up part of the pharmaceutical drug depo testosterone (“Testosterone-cypionate” *Pharmaceutical Manufacturing Encyclopedia*).

and its external world” – not unlike the metaphor of the bridge (211). Kuppers furthers this definition as, “the productivity of thought, how things (thoughts, concepts, material, the world) assemble towards something new, towards something emerging” (“Toward a Rhizomatic Model of Disability” 223). In “And Yet,” the speaker’s body is in process, their identity is unfurling like the maple leaves in spring. Clare signals this becoming with seasonal changes in the poem, but also via the speaker’s anticipation: “In the mirror I wait ... Body begins.” The impatience connected to the medicalized transition is in tension with the seasonal-metaphorical transition; they contrast and grapple with one another, as in the lines, “Voice cracks. / Stubble glints. // Open the cellar. Soon, soon the maples will unfurl their green fists,” and, “Body begins. // Split the stone open, then the lilac’s deep purple” (91, 92).

This is in keeping with Kuppers’ understanding of rhizome theory: “a rhizomatic model of disability ... can hold a wide variety of experiences and structured positions in moments of precarious productive imbalance” (“Toward a Rhizomatic” 223). In “As Yet,” as in other poems in the collection such as “Thin Silver Notes,” Clare’s practice echoes Kuppers’ theory: seemingly disparate thought paths are pulled together without hierarchy (there is no dominant voice). For example, Clare counter-points desire for transition against weariness with the medical-industrial-complex (the embodiment of testosterone):

In another time, at another place, I might have relied upon  
insistent dreams; gods, goddesses, spirits all;  
an herbalist stepping out back; nettle or ginseng.

Jaw squares.  
Hips and ass slim. (92)

.....

This drug I shoot in careful fractions:  
I step into its exam rooms,  
pay its bills, increase its profits.

Pecs bulk.  
Skin roughens.

Body begins to settle. (93)

The tone of the first stanza quoted here is nostalgic, harking back to an older form of medicine when the earth was more involved in and central to our processes of healing. These longer lines contrast with the

short, punchy and direct stanza that follows, complementing the shift in register. The settling that Clare's speaker searches for is similar to Dyens' explanation of the moment of transformation within the cyborg: "But when the body is transformed, whether naturally or artificially, its relationship to the environment is affected, and it can no longer exist exactly as before" (55). In this poem, the body may actually fit more traditionally into cyborg theory as it is changed and altered by the medical-industrial complex, "But today I have Pfizer, Upjohn, Watson, ... the very stretch of skin over bone" (92). Pfizer, Upjohn and Watson are large pharmaceutical companies that produce testosterone and it is only through some engagement with them that a medical process of transition can be started.

Clare does not show transition as simple; rather, he complicates it and, "refuses to narrate a revelatory dramatic clean change; there is none of the "purity and denial of mixture that recur in many transsexual<sup>35</sup> autobiographical narratives" (quoted in Koppers, "Trans-ing Disability" 605). The poem closes with an image of collision: "here at the confluence, river and ocean collide – / current rushing head long, waves pushing back – stones / tumble logs roll. Tell me: where in this hiss and froth/ might I lay myself down?" (93) Clare posits that the speaker wants to be in the middle of it all; through the medium of poetry, he reshapes the typical discourse of transition into resistance against a neatly completed<sup>36</sup> version of the body.

"In the Woodshop" crosses different kinds of boundaries to those explored in "Whale Bone and Ash" and "And Yet": this time, dividing lines between the body and the outside world are blurred. This technique is both situating and disorienting; as Ahmed says, "Disorientation could be described here as the 'becoming oblique' of the world, a becoming that is at once interior and exterior, as that which is given, or as that which gives what is given its new angle" (162). Similarly, Prosser proposes the skin as the boundary point for the body, "Bordering inside and outside the body, the point of separation and contact between you and me, skin is the key interface between self and other, between the biological, the psychic, and the social" (*Second Skins* 65). While Prosser states the skin as a material fact, Clare's poem toys with

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<sup>35</sup> The term "transsexual" is not typically used anymore within trans- communities as it is a bit outdated; however, historically it was used to differentiate between those who have had surgical involvement in their transition process and those who have not. That sort of distinction is no longer used, and I will be solely using the term trans- when explaining these quotations.

<sup>36</sup> For the medical community, transition often signals a completion – a transition from female to male is traditionally only acceptable if the binary is maintained. I read Clare's use of confluence as a way to suggest a genderqueer identity or at least allow for a gender continuum.



this boundary from the outset, “Cradle this box in your palm, / walnut and oak sanded / to silky line of sternum” (113). The poem oscillates between box and body, merging and mingling them; although the box does not move from the addressee’s hand, the body is likened to its smoothness and beauty. As body and object merge, Clare stretches the limits of the physical human.

This poem can be understood as an extended metaphor for the body. The box in the poem contains “peonies / on the brink of blossom,” which may signify the vulnerable and fragile parts of the body or hint at the blossoming of transition. Mark Doty writes that metaphor is sometimes, “the advanced guard of the mind; something in us reaches out, into the landscape in front of us, looking for the right vessel” (Doty). Clare’s “right vessel” to express the way in which the body can be crafted and shaped is that of this described box. This metaphor reaches both out and in; it reaches towards an idealized uninhabited natural world and into the world of human craft, a woodworker’s studio. The poem brings these two “worlds” together so that, “Clare has camouflaged his body so completely, nature imagery ... takes the place of bodily imagery” (Wheeler 568).

The body is a site of pain and trauma in much of Clare’s work. This poem works towards reclamation of the body through metaphor and naming the body in different ways, shifting the language surrounding the trans- and/or disabled body away from the medicalized and towards a new and imaginatively expansive “naturalism.” As Kupperts suggests, Clare’s poems present “processes of living [as] processes of transformation”; “The boundary between outside and inside, external and internal, recedes as the register of the ‘natural’ takes on a new meaning in Clare’s poetry” (“Trans-ing Disability Poetry at the Confluence” 608). The “new meaning” that Kupperts refers to I interpret as an elevated view of nature, one that is reminiscent of the culmination in transcendence for the speaker in Driskill’s “Love Poems for Billy Jack.” Clare is pushing for the reader to make connections between their body and the world around them, searching for a communal position instead of one of isolation – similar to the community created in “Thin Silver Notes” and the aggregation of the cyborg.

After the sensual interaction between the addressee and the box in the opening lines, “In the Woodshop” turns outward as the box opens:

Lid tumbles  
 ‘til the box lies flat, skin of wood  
 against skin of hand: muscle releases  
 bone, corn rocks crib, heron tiptoes

toward salmon

Suddenly the outside world – far beyond the box and the woodshop – is brought into the poem, into the body. It is as if the addressee's body is not limited to the boundary of their skin; instead, they have incorporated the corn, heron and salmon, the field and stream into their own flesh and bone. Again, cyborg theory offers a means of interpreting Clare's inclusive vision of the body; while this poem notably lacks any specific reference to technology, it displays the bodily theory which accompanies the cyborg and which redefines the edges of the body, not unlike Tolbert's use of the semicolon in "Beg Approval" (discussed page 115). Mimi Nguyen explains how, through prosthetics and digital technology, the body can become limitless: "At this interface the body is at stake – where it begins or ends, what it means, what is replaceable (and what is not), what its limits might be" (283). While Clare's work appears at odds with the digital and prosthetic limitlessness Nguyen articulates in choosing the natural realm over technology, both propose a new and radical expansiveness. In the poem, the body has merged with the wooden box and with the surrounding world; Clare thus implies that there are no limits to what the body can incorporate, forwarding an alternative type of encompassment and interconnection. The body is expanded precisely because the trans- body lacks the "agreed" language and normative physicality to orient itself within the world in standard ways.

Clare places the body on the point of becoming, the point of transformation, close to Fulton's idea of fractal poetics<sup>37</sup>: "Fractal poetics is interested in that point of metamorphosis, when structure is incipient, all threshold, a neither-nor" (63). After the colon in "In the Woodshop," as "muscle releases bone," the unspooling of the person begins; this is the point of metamorphosis and change. The poem itself works outward, spiraling to more complex relationships ("corn rocks crib") and more tangled subjects ("heron tiptoes toward salmon"). It is as if, "complex systems are balanced on the edge of chaos, where the components 'never quite lock in place, and yet never quite dissolve into turbulence either'" (Fulton 65). This chaos is then carefully contained in the final lines of the poem, as the box goes back to just being a box and the contents are queried, "bevel nestled into bevel, what / will they contain: stone soft as clay, / bone fiercely hollow?" With the inclusion of these paired images, the box may now be seen

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<sup>37</sup> Fulton takes the idea of fractals from quantum physics (the intricate repetitions that can be easily overlooked as randomness) and applies this to contemporary poetry, specifically free verse (48-55). Her aim of a fractal theory is to begin to quantify and define patterns and systems that lack names.

to contain the body in all its forms. Clare uses the metaphor of a stone to refer to his body throughout his writing. Wheeler contextualizes this metaphor and the way the body relates to nature: “Nature becomes the body’s haven. Clare entrusts ‘the only inviolate parts of myself’ to the stones” (568). The stone becomes both safety and resiliency; however, to extend the metaphor, stones can still be shaped and transformed by external elements, and they can be used both as building materials and as impediments. At the close of the poem the stone is not in its complete form – it is in process – and the bone, the potentially more fragile object, is hollow, and defiantly so. The bone lacks marrow; it is empty of story. The body has been reclaimed and is a ready vessel for new stories.

In his creative work, Clare examines and extends the range of metaphorical vehicles applicable to the body in order to probe, trouble and expand the limits and views of the queer and disabled body. Through non-linear poems that often conjoin multiple voices, the body is dis-abled and unpicked. Prosser’s second skin theory, relating to the elasticity of the mind/body connection, also relates to narrative: “a kind of second skin: the story the transsexual must weave around the body in order that this body may be ‘read’” (*Second Skins* 101). Clare weaves a story of the body, not just the trans- experience, but the disabled, queer, and white experience; one that is directly connected to the earth. The search for what the body is or might be is encapsulated in a dynamic multitude, as Clare questions, “How could any single translation catch all the layers: depth of word, reach of metaphor, rocking of sound and rhythm?” (*The Marrow’s Telling* 73) Clare’s attempts to translate the body into language show a body that is expansive, material, and encompassing of its experiences and of the world around it.

## Connections: Concluding within an Open Context

As a trans- poet myself, I evidently have a strong personal relationship to the work I have explored in the critical essay which accompanies the creative component of my PhD; and some of the strategies and tools employed by the poets I chose to write on can also be seen at work in my own praxis. As a poet, I am drawn to the gray areas of feeling, and to consideration of how emotion clouds memory, identity and experience. My poems probe the strangeness of memory; I am in search of both a language adequate to my experience and a means of articulating the opaqueness of memory and the multiplicities of the self. In the effort to better understand the underlying impulses of my own poetry, and the genre of trans- and gender non-conforming poetry more generally, I have found the work of Rebekah Edwards, among others, particularly useful. Edwards employs the term trans-poetics – her use of the hyphenation here connects with Koppers’ notion of “trans-ing,” proposing a poetics in motion. She states that trans-poetics:

refers to techniques for communicating ‘complex, unstable, contradictory relations between body and soul, social self and psyche.’ Trans-poetics projects often seek to navigate the limits of the (im)possible, writing the ‘resistance of the inarticulate, in a language that situates’ or lending poetic form to ‘a body that has been historically illegible.’ (252)

Both elements that Edwards mentions are present in Driskill, Tolbert and Clare’s work; these poets are typically trying to write into verbal expression a body that has been dismissed or erased; and the relationship of this body to language, as well as the ways in which it is represented and deployed in their poems, is important. My own writing tends more towards exploration of language that accurately situates the body; however, the subtlety with which I approach visibility also addresses illegibility. While I do not want to draw prescriptive or decisive conclusions that narrowly define trans- and gender non-conforming writing, it may be of interest for me to illuminate more fully some of the overlapping themes, modes of attention and methods that these three poets (and I) use, within the context of my readings of their work.

Driskill, Tolbert and Clare all take specific approaches to the technical apparatus of writing as a means of trans-ing their poetry, the most evident of which is their handling of punctuation and syntax. Creative use of punctuation is a means of working against a prescribed system in order to challenge the expected. Each of these poets subverts standard punctuation, grammar and syntax in different ways at different times to highlight or resist the restrictions that are placed on them in their search for effective

expression. Samuel Ace, one of the first trans poets to be published in the US, writes that, “punctuation is kind of like gender; [in] that it is an agreed-upon thing, that we agree that a comma means this kind of breath, and a period means this kind of breath” (Peterson 527). Peterson expands on Ace’s explanation by stating that, “leaving the punctuation of the poem undirected and the line breaks ambiguous are also utopian gestures of leaving the gender of the poem open” (Peterson 527). It is not only trans- and gender non-conforming poets who question the fixities of punctuation or agreed-upon linguistic practices; but breaking these rules and relating those breakages to gender is a means of mapping non-conformity to traditional gender binaries onto the texture of writing. These socially constructed rules can be bent, broken and reconceived in the search for methods of expressing other modes of being through language. Driskill fluctuates between conventional punctuation and none, as in “Evening with Andrew Jackson,” where s/he uses punctuation to mark formality, and “Summer Haiku,” in which s/he uses none. The best example of Tolbert’s play with punctuation is “Underneath February is a test strip. And believe me. Believe Me. I would,” which experiments with both excessive punctuation and a strange, almost robotically generated syntax that works to confound the reader by simulating a mathematical equation with no solution. When Clare draws attention to punctuation, for example in using colons at the end of stanzas in “Thins Silver Notes,” the aim is to create an impression of fracturing or disorientation. I use punctuation sparingly, for example in “Who Will Not Name Me?” where long lines shape the architecture of the poem, creating a breathless rhythm that the minimal punctuation does not intrude upon. Punctuation is a textual signifier that trans- and gender non-conforming poets can use to replicate a boundary, and to exemplify the need for a new kind of syntax which better represents our reality. However, as Gould states, “No map can really tell us all we need to know,” and these attempts are always an “imperfect rendering” of reality.

The manner in which Driskill, Tolbert and Clare utilize the space of the page can be thought of as a physical representation of Ahmed’s concept of disorientation. While the aim is often simply to play with and move around in white space, disorientation and even orientation offer a different way to think about the field of the poem, and thus about the space it exists in, encompasses and manipulates. Ahmed states that, “Moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground. Disorientation as a bodily feeling can be unsettling” (157). Using white

space to disorient or orient the reader is not queer-specific (Language poets, conceptual poets, and Avant Garde poets to name a few all do this), but it is interesting to consider spatial dislocation – not just within the context of the poem but also with regard to the physical context of the page – from the perspective of a trans- and gender non-conforming reading. To think of the page as a physical space, a place where Ahmed's orientations can occur, is to think of a kind of architecture. In his introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha situates race and culture positions within a physically conceived architecture. He states that,

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interactions, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. (5)

I want to relate this architecture to the page, to suggest that the poem, as realized within the framework of the page, enacts the structure of a metaphorical cultural identity, which is to say it models the context of the speaker and/or lyric subject. Driskill, Tolbert and Clare take non-standard approaches to the presentation of the poem on the page in order to create a sense of fluidity within the structure. For Driskill this is evident in poems like “Map of the Americas,” with its word map, and “Love Poems for Billy Jack,” which incorporates large amounts of white space and floats between present, past and future. Tolbert exhibits the connection between these two ideas – Ahmed's and Bhabha's – most clearly as he disrupts space and form to emphasize fracturing and slippage of identity and space. This can be seen occurring in the sonnet crowns “Beg Approval” and “(ir)Retrieval,” but also in some poems not discussed in my chapter on his work, which are printed sideways in the collection. Clare sometimes uses longer-form poems to fracture and blend disparate voices or narratives, as in “And Yet” or “Bedrock” (which is not addressed in the chapter); however, the innovative deployment of line arrangement can also be seen in “Thin Silver Notes” where disorientation is reflected in the stanza breaks. In my own work, I approach the space of the page as a fluid canvas which allows for different thought paths to encompass a metaphorical expression of disarticulated selves: identity and linear progress are fractured in, for example, poems such as “Gonad Choir,” which has several different voices, and “On Loan,” which uses repetition and white space to expand a thought across the page, fracturing and changing meanings as it extends.

The idea of a “stairwell,” or a means to get from point A to B, is not very different from a bridge, though crucially a bridge (unlike a stairwell) is a non-hierarchical structure (a pertinent point to poets who embody rhizomatic thought in their work). The title of Tolbert’s collection, *Gephyromania*, demonstrates Doty’s point about metaphor: “something in us reaches out, into the landscape in front of us, looking for the right vessel” (Doty). In Clare’s poem “Bedrock,” he equates story-telling with the building of a bridge, which in turn is seen as the foundational text of the body: the poem opens, “Night after night I finger / each thin cable of story” and closes, “Each thin cable and soon I will have / a rope, strong and thick, to anchor here // in the bedrock, stretch high across / the river, beginnings of a bridge” (*The Marrow’s Telling* 63, 68). This metaphor is a means by which to understand the in between trans- space – the bridge is human-made, in this case a construction of which the poet is the architect; it is also a metaphor to explain a world that at times resists such identities. Sometimes the bridge is achieved through the deployment of physical gaps and white space in the poetry, sometimes it resides in and emerges from imagery which opens a liminal space between identities.

While Driskill does not mention bridges of any sort, his work is also trying to build something new, a bridge out of language. S/he also endeavors to evolve a firmer understanding of identity through the structure of the poem, as in “Map of the Americas,” or in “High Yella Sonnet,” which reworks the conventions of the form to admit a specifically hybrid voice. In this play with and repurposing of traditional forms, Driskill’s praxis also resonates with Tolbert’s, a central feature of whose first collection is its investment in and experimentation with the parameters and premises of pre-existing forms and modes. As a practitioner, I am particularly drawn to forms, whether traditional or self-invented, that encourage or demand repetition; I am attracted by and enjoy generating the rhythmic effects that repetition produces. Culler explains: “Rhythm is one of the major forces through which poems haunt us, just as poems themselves are haunted by rhythms of other poems” (140). This haunting effect can be found in my poems, “An Accurate Accounting of Our Possessions” and “Mrak Hall Fee Hike Protests,” both of which are pantoums.

Metaphor – which can itself be seen as a kind of bridge, a means to link two disparate objects or ideas – can facilitate the articulation of something that once lacked expression or embodiment in language. Thinking of metaphor this way also affords the opportunity to reflect on the parallel concepts

of hybridity and the rhizome. Rather than promoting resolution, these theories, when utilized in the practice of making poetry, offer different ways of modeling and working towards the successful articulation of unresolved states. While I approached hybridity on a slightly broader basis in the chapter on Driskill, Bhabha's concept comes from postcolonial theory and can be summarized as follows:

"Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects" (159). Bhabha further explains:

Hybridity ... is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures ... The displacement from symbol to sign creates a crisis for any concept of authority based on a system of recognition: colonial specularly, doubly inscribed, does not produce a mirror where the self apprehends; it is always the split screen of the self and its doubling, the hybrid. (162)

Of the poems I have discussed in my essay, hybridity in its most literal sense is most apparent in "High Yella Sonnet"; however, it exists within much of Driskill's work. Having grown up white in suburban California, I have more in common with the colonizer than the colonized; my lens is that of a white middle class (however broadly that term may now be stretched) transmasculine body; and this window on the world brings a specific slant to bear on my work, of which I am more than aware. And while I personally have an understanding of gender identity as fluid rather than fixed (and which thus resonates with while obviously not mapping onto Bhabha's argument), one of the reasons I chose to write about Driskill's work is precisely because it is different from mine; it both broadens my understanding of the gender spectrum and allows me to begin to understand some of the gender diversity that existed at earlier historical points in the United States, but which also continues into the present. My own favored approach to metaphor (one of the poet's key tools for creating hybridity) is to layer juxtapositions to effect a kind of disorientation, which creates bridges between possibly disparate ideas – strategies exemplified in "Third Insemination" and "We Call Ourselves Family."

The poets I have written about are all working to construct a self in their writing, which is an inevitable outcome of transition. Here I use transition not medically and not even into a specific kind of trans-ness, but the transition out of a state of binary gender identity and into a state of difference. To construct the self is to re-member it, to re-orient, re-claim, and re-identify; but also to continue to recognize past existences, to write forwards and backwards simultaneously. Driskill's multiplicity comes from expressing a communally influenced voice: often the poems include rhizomatic connections because



these are a basic, day-to-day reality for him. This poetry arises out of and models an inability to be fully connected to one group or the other. For Tolbert, multiplicity is often linked to mourning; in his work, identity is plural, and the writing consequently branches and connects outwards, beyond the page: there is a link to the past but also to an as yet un-configured future, a future which is inherent rather than concretely realized. Additionally (and independent of the trope of mourning) there are instances, for example “Underneath February,” in which the poems lack a clear subject or object. Clare writes in a dialogic voice: the poetic voice itself is fractured in a way that Driskill’s, say, is not. The voices in Clare’s poems are driving the poems towards a conclusion that grounds their reality – as in “And Yet,” which aims to understand the interrelations between body, medicine, and world. Another form of vocal division occurs in “Whale Bone and Ash,” where the speaker is split in two: one “self” who is able to commune with the whales and another who is unable to cope with the onset of feminizing puberty. Ultimately these splits and divisions create a similar effect – to represent an inarticulable reality, one that lacks an evolved language and requires the poet to innovate in order to approximate what does not yet verbally exist.

Deleuze and Guattari define multiplicity as something that, “has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature (the laws of combination therefore increase in number as the multiplicity grows)” (8). The idea of an expanding and expansive consciousness arises in my poem “Lake Appetite,” where each new line is conceived of as being in another voice; cumulatively, these unfold like lapping waves. The re-articulation of the self in the context of rhizome theory requires that no dominant voice should emerge, and in my own work, the absence of a dominant voice allows for a kind of fluidity and flexibility with the speaker that fosters what feels to me like an effective representation of my lived reality as a trans- writer and person. I posit that we are trying to destabilize a singular voice by writing into the multiple, and by seeking out a formal variety which allows rhizomatic thought to develop in an ever-expanding sense.

Another way in which the approaches of these writers overlap is through the concept of mourning, though they express this in different ways and highlight different aspects. Driskill’s elegies are often generated for a community: in “Love Poems for Billy Jack,” while the elegy is a personalized address from poet to subject, it has, as my analysis suggests, been written with a communal purpose in mind. Poems such as “Map of the Americas” and “Evening with Andrew Jackson” draw on a collective

mourning that is not to the forefront of the poems but permeates their speakers and is part of the context out of which they arise. In poems such as “Elegy,” Tolbert expresses personal grief, loss of the former self and perhaps even mourning for the fracturing of the self. In Clare’s poetry, mourning is connected to the loss of agency and the rewriting of memory that institutionalization performs on the disabled body, as seen in the poems “Photographs” and “And Yet.” Within my own work, mourning and grief emerge in several ways: I share Tolbert’s interest in exploring the losses incurred through transition; additionally, my poems often meditate on the loss or imagined potential for loss of those intimately connected to the speaker. My work is also often clouded by an undercurrent of fear and danger that often clouds, as if change could create loss at any moment. My poems “The Moment the Map Changed,” “Memorial Across the Atlantic,” and “Before the Ban” exemplify this “low hum” of loss and fear. Transition loss is most apparent in the poems “Dear Christopher” and “Beginning,” but it is also a presence in “It’s Not What Everyone Says It Will Be,” which confronts the emotional plane of fertility and conception.

Writing as a means of mourning is a way to invoke a kind of tangible action through poetry, since to elegize a subject is at once to remember and (re)member that subject. Tolbert’s line from “(ir)Retrieval,” “they memory / they memory they member” is pertinent here (19). The interconnectedness of remembering and re-memembering purports cyclical ideas of building and reminiscence, proposing that to elegize is not just to recall but also to create and reconstruct the idea of a person (or of a past reality). Often these writers also self-elegize, and in doing so expose the ways in which memory and imagination cross-fertilize. Driskill both articulates and challenges cultural memory, probing and expanding its boundaries to elucidate truths which butt up against the dominant historical memory that erases minority identity. This can be seen in “Two Approaches to Memory,” which first grapples with and seeks to “conquer” memory (for an undisclosed purpose), and subsequently takes it in as something sweet and to be trusted. Clare, too, is searching for the truth in, and the truth of, memory. This truth is not collective but personal, and is related to mental health and disability; it centers on what is lost when the medical community determines incompetence and how this declaration stretches into life beyond the medical halls. Tolbert’s approach to memory is fluid, perhaps more rhizomatic. He is often to be found “reaching back ... [to] what cannot be reached,” as in “The Palinode,” attempting to respond to and recover, but discovering that there is no singular point from which to begin. In my own work, I am

attracted to the strangeness of memory: its fluidity, fickleness and elusiveness. This is evident in my poems “Beginning,” which explores an imagined birth memory, and “To Highway 24 East,” which unravels the memory of a place.

Reading and writing about Driskill, Tolbert and Clare has afforded me new insight into the possibilities (and the possibilities for activism) contained within trans- and gender non-conforming poetry. One of the overarching ideas evident in all of their work is their collective refusal to write into a narrative that is simple; each one embraces a different and uniquely complex identity and position. I have been able to reflect on my own writing practice throughout this critical project and identify what is instinctual and what aspects of my own work I wish to change in relation to the intentionality of these trans- and gender non-conforming poets. This has allowed me to continue to experiment and focus that experimentation within my own work; to find what feels to me a solid voice and frame my artistic choices in terms of language, style, and formal play. I am grateful for the impact this deep reading within a small but diverse group has had on both my work and my understanding of the world. As Driskill, Tolbert and Clare show, the ways in which language and form can sometimes appear to limit and categorize can always be written against, and I hope to continue discovering new ways in which “closed” approaches may be “opened.”

## Appendix 1

Excerpt from “Map of the Americas” for visual presentation:

My hair

spread upon                    the pillow  
 a landscape of ice   My chest the plains  
 and hills of this land My spine  
     the continental divide  
     my heart drums the  
 rhythm of returning  
 buffalo herds Do you  
     notice the deserts  
     and green  
     mountains  
         on my belly's  
         topography  
         or the  
         way  
         my  
         hips  
             rise  
             like  
             ancient pyramids  
 My legs wrapped with the  
 Amazon the Andes the Pampas  
 the vast roads of the Incas  
     here are rainforests  
     highlands  
 stolen breath  
     trapped deep  
     in mine  
 shafts and  
     my feet  
     that reach  
     to touch  
         Antarctica

(Driskill, *Walking with Ghosts* 10)

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